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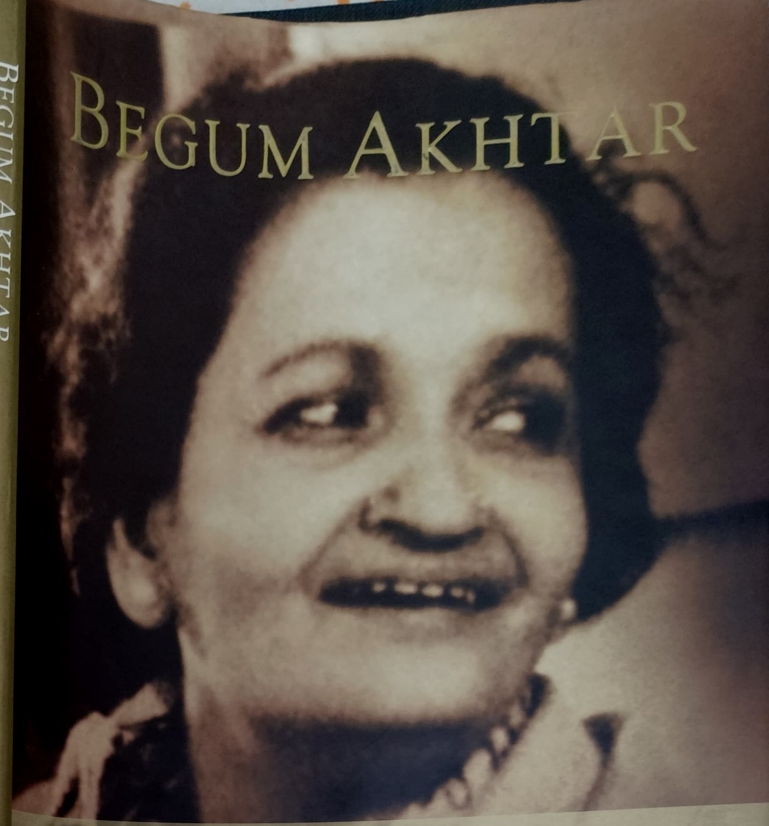
BEGUM AKHTAR
the story of my ammi

SHANTI HIRANAND

Viva



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Begum Akhtar, b. circa. 1914-d, 1974, a legend in her own lifetime, is one such person on whom there is no available biography. A pioneer in the field of Indian light classical music, she helped popularize the traditional form of *thumri* and *ghazal gayaki* and took it to the concert level all over India and abroad.

Unfortunately, despite her talents, an entire generation of Indians has grown up listening to only gossip connected with Begum Akhtar's life; be it the controversy surrounding the Nawab of Rampur or her other alleged affairs.

This is what Shanti Hiranand has attempted in her memoirs. It is a book that will hopefully provide a salve to all those open wounds surrounding Begum Akhtar's persona.

Shantiji has examined her beloved Ammi with the objective philosophical gaze of a woman and has shown us a side of Begum Akhtar that was hitherto hidden in the dusty corridors of House No. 1, Havelock Road, Lucknow.

BEGUM AKHTAR

the story of my ammi

Happy B'day Vighnesh
With best wishes
From Nakul
19 Jan 2026

BEGUM AKHTAR
the story of my ammi

SHANTI HIRANAND

Begum Akhtar

the story of my ammi

Shanti Hiranand

Vivo Books Private Limited
Bangalore • Hyderabad

PROLOGUE

They stopped us at the Wagah Border for a passport check on our way to Pakistan in March 1962.

They flipped through my papers a couple of times and looked me up and down. My crumpled sari, my little bindi and my shy smile did not impress them. Their senior officer mustered the courage to say, "Shanti Hiranand Akhtar. What kind of a name is that?"

"She is my daughter." Ammi said confidently.

"Your daughter! Shanti!" He was almost shouting at us now.

"We are like this in India. I don't know how it is in Pakistan," said Begum Akhtar confounding the Pakistani officer with this candid answer as she did on so many occasions. This episode was so essentially Ammi that it has stayed with me ever since.

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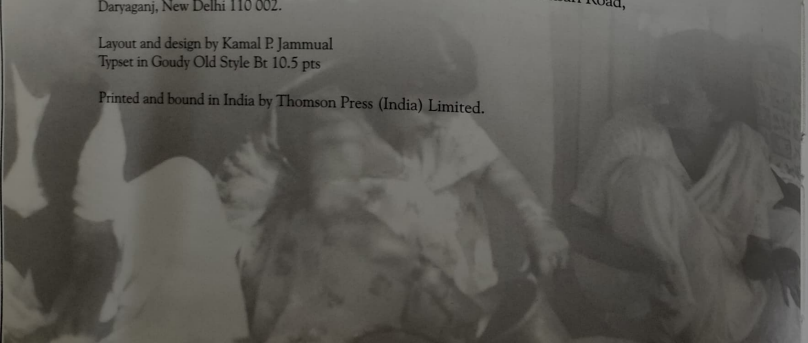
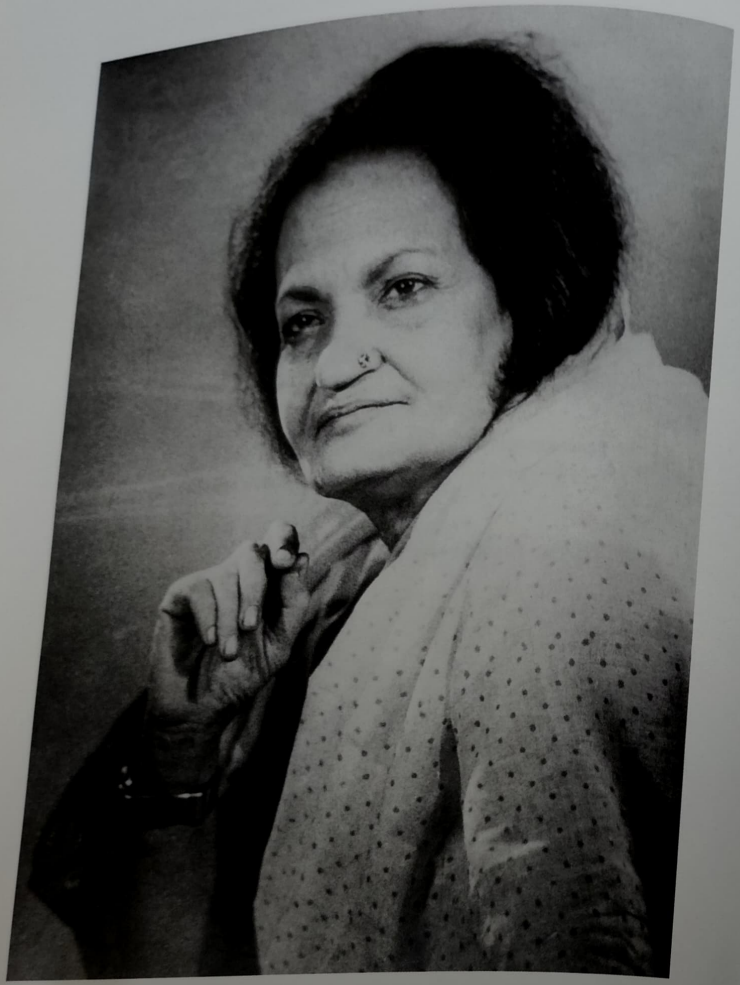


To

my father Hiranand Mansukhani and mother Sita Mansukhani and my husband Jagan for being there for me always and helping me reach where I am today.



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I owe a great debt to Neeta Gupta for making me write this book, for her persistent pressure to document my life with Ammi, many thanks also to Uma Trilok for encouraging me to take on this project.

Above all, I remain indebted to my family — my son Nishchint, my daughter-in-law Neeta and my two grandsons Tanay and Jai for all the love and support. I would also like to thank my friend Rohit Sethi for sparing time for me.

A Word about Shanti Hiranand's Book on Begum Akhtar

Indian Legends have a way of completely disappearing from public memory as living, breathing (sometimes fire-breathing!), three-dimensional characters who are both loved and loathed for what they are. They remain stuck somewhere on the firmament, like the stars, unreachable, unassailable, untouchable. It is considered blasphemous to even think of deconstructing their myth, equal in depravity to acknowledging one's parents' sex lives! As a result of which the things that one would have liked to say to them remain unsaid. Resentments and imagined slights grow and fester. Social hypocrisy demands that we, the acolytes, remain quiet. The pain of our rejection mellows with the years and then suddenly a day comes when we forget the living person, the trappings that defined them, trivia that seemed so important then is completely forgotten. All that remains in our minds is an image of some demigod, performing superhuman feats.

Begum Akhtar, b. circa. 1914 - d. 1974, a legend in her own lifetime, is one such person on whom there is no available biography. A pioneer in the field of Indian

under a mattress whenever she stayed over at Havelock Road. The occupants of the house couldn't quite fathom the sanctity of something as simple as a toothbrush. They would as easily use anyone else's! I would be holding my stomach and laughing at her descriptions of the people and events. It was simply fascinating. At such times I would urge her to record these and other incidents from her interactions with her Guru, and string them together into a book to help others know this aspect of Begum Akhtar's personality, as well as to inspire them.

Shantiji has an amazing memory and it has been fascinating journeying back to an era in the history of Indian music, which helped shape the future of Indian classical music in the last century. Shantiji has delved into the practice of *shagirdi* and *ganda badhana*, the traditional Guru-Shishya bond, which have all but disappeared in this institutionalized age of training. She has dwelt on the changes that have come over in the music industry over the last century. From an exalted individual search for one's voice it has turned into a veritable profit-seeking vocation. What is lost is the total surrender and dedication that students in her time felt for the Guru. She recalls with pride her association with so many of Begum Akhtar's contemporaries, many of whom still treat her with the same love and affection.

Though Shantiji's effort has always been to present Ammi in as true a light as possible, she has done so with love and caring and a tremendous sense of pride for a woman who rose from humble beginnings to conquer the world of music. It would have been far easier for Shantiji to remain quiet and let these events slip into oblivion, but it goes to her credit that she has taken up the challenge to put it down on paper. It has been a tightrope walk for her to talk at length on some of the more controversial issues concerned with Ammi's life. And she puts it very elegantly when she says that there were some things she just didn't dare discuss with Ammi!

Neeta Gupta

PREFACE

Akhtari Bai Faizabadi aka Begum Akhtar was a unique singer of her time. She was a musician known for her spontaneity. Born in October 1914, Akhtar kept audiences spellbound for over six decades since the start of her singing career at the tender age of seven.

At her first concert in Calcutta in 1934 — which came to her by default— the nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu, after hearing Begum Akhtar said, "Today I listened to you. Tomorrow you must come and hear me." Thus began a musical, acting and teaching career of one of India's greatest exponents of *thumri*, *khayal* and *ghazal*. She was a fiercely independent-minded person and a brave character who drew her life path herself. Begum Akhtar was among a small number of artists who

Ammi's career as a recording artist is said to have begun in 1933 with the Megaphone Company, but it was not until her seventh single was released in 1938, the *ghazal* "*Diwana Banana Hai to Diwana Banana De*", that Ammi had a real "hit". Her love for music was intertwined with her affection for theatre and films. In the 1930s and 1940s, Ammi acted in several films and Calcutta, then home to vibrant theatre, was a regular haunt. But soon she realized that her first love was singing and so she plunged whole-heartedly into singing.

Ammi was a very cultured person, despite her background. She was always dignified and spoke with a little reserve, but was always candid enough to admit her origins and would never hide it. As she once told me, "You don't have a choice of your birth; you are born here. Whatever is given from childhood to you, you accept as a child. You must accept your birth."

Ammi was married in 1944 to Istiak Ahmed Abbassi, a respected lawyer in Lucknow, and as part of the arrangement, agreed to give up singing. As I have stated later in this book, the marriage was part of her dream to reach a respectable status in society. She also stopped singing after marriage and this, as Abbu later said in an interview, took an emotional and physical toll on Ammi. While several stories have done the rounds about her reported return to the recording world with her first session at AIR Lucknow in 1948, I still believe it all started after her mother's death in 1950. As Abbu later recalled:

> Her mother's death drew a heavy emotional and physical toll. After her marriage, she had given up singing. But when her mother died, she became so hysterical with grief that she used to sit and weep endlessly at her mother's grave. I was most worried. Our good family-friend and physician advised me that unless I permit her to resume her singing and thus provide her with an emotional outlet, she might become mentally deranged with sorrow. So I had to agree. Slowly she resumed her Radio programmes and her concert performances.

I have heard stories of her background, of her life prior to my meeting her in 1952 in Lucknow. The personae of Akhtar was a highly sensitive one; her moods could swing from one end to another. But she was an extraordinarily charming woman who could win over the hearts of most people around her, no matter what strata of society they belonged to.

Her singing evolved over a period of time with some changes in her style of singing after she restarted her career as a vocalist in 1948. There is no doubt in my mind that it was the influence of Abbasi Saheb and his love for Urdu poetry that gave Ammi the clarity of her recitation of her prose.

Her singing was natural and came instinctively, she did not prepare for any programme. Her sense told her what and how to sing. Her eyes carried the message to all in the audience. Her capacity to sing a song on request was tremendous and often she would render a piece of poetry with such relish that listeners would often be spellbound.

Her life cannot be treated in isolation from her surroundings. While I have attempted to tell her story in the following narrative, there is so much more to her. She herself was candid enough to admit that she came from a tradition of *tawaifs*. But she added that she earned her living from that profession with honesty. Ammi told me that even then she saw people around her doing things quietly and under cover.

Ammi's generosity, engaging personality, and charm are legendary. She made a great deal of money, but gave it away generously to her immediate family and to all those in need of help. If someone were to comment, even casually, upon the beauty of a shawl or a diamond that she was wearing, it was not uncommon for her to offer it on the spot as a gift. As a teacher, she treated her advanced *shisyas* (students) like her own children. Little wonder, that I was like a daughter to her and she a mother to me. She protected me, bought gifts for me and my children, and as I recall now, virtually arranged my marriage. Begum Akhtar never requested or accepted any teaching fees, and freely passed on her knowledge of music to all those who wished to learn.

light classical music, she helped popularize the traditional form of *thumri* and *ghazal* gayaki and took it to the concert level all over India and abroad. *Thumri* is a light classical form of music in which the stress is not laid so much on the purity of the raag as on the expression of emotions and "*hav-bhav*". Begum Akhtar took this genre and treated it with her own special palette, and what emerged is a collection of some of the most sensuous and haunting melodies of the last century. Her music still sets the standard for connoisseurs of this genre to this day.

Unfortunately, despite her talents, an entire generation of Indians has grown up listening to only gossip connected with Begum Akhtar's life, be it the controversy surrounding the Nawab of Rampur or her other alleged affairs. There was never any credible source one could approach to clarify these juicy tales. Some of these stories have remained as they were, while many others have grown and acquired a life of their own, getting spicier in the retelling over the years until there is a sort of creative explosion of stories surrounding Ammi's life. Many movies have already been made, borrowing generously from episodes in her life; many documentaries have questioned her rumoured affairs. Everyone has tried to prick at a festering wound, but no one has provided that healing touch.

This is what Shanti Hiranand has attempted in her memoirs; she has tried to heal. It is a book that will put to rest all pending issues, gaping discrepancies and obvious lies. It is a book that will hopefully provide a salve to all those open wounds surrounding Begum Akhtar's persona. Shantiji has examined her beloved Ammi under the microscope of her never-ending love for her, as well as with the objective philosophical gaze of a woman who has had the distance of over 25 years without her. She may not necessarily tell all, but she has shown us a side of Begum Akhtar that was hitherto hidden in the dusty corridors of House No. 1, Havelock Road, Lucknow.

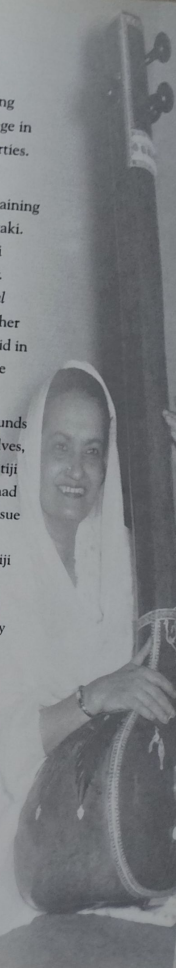
The seeds of this book were sown years ago in the city of Lucknow itself, the culturally vibrant capital of North India that Ammi kept returning to from her various sojourns. It is also the city where Shanti Hiranand was born in 1933. Her father had interests in the clothings business in Lucknow. Shanti Hiranand's penchant for music goes back to her

childhood, and it wasn't very long before it became an all-consuming passion in her life. She started her early training at the Music College in Lucknow. Her father's business took them to Lahore in the early forties. She gave her first performance on Radio Lahore in March 1947.

After Partition, Shantiji's family shifted back to Lucknow and her training resumed under Ustad Aijaz Hussain Khan of Rampur in Khayal Gayaki. Alongside she was also performing regularly on AIR. In 1952, Shanti Hiranand finally met her Guru, Guide and Mentor in Begum Akhtar. 'Ammi' trained her in the traditional forms of *thumri, dadra* and *ghazal* singing. Ammi also gave her an opportunity to publicly perform with her on all her shows. Begum Akhtar's passing away in 1974 left a deep void in Shanti Hiranand's life. This emptiness drove her to dedicate her entire efforts to excel in the art given to her by her Guru.

It is interesting how these two women from seemingly diverse backgrounds could come to such an exalted level of understanding between themselves, in times that were not very conducive to such social interactions. Shantiji belonged to an upper middle-class business family. She and her sisters had a liberal education and were used to a certain space and freedom to pursue their own passions, while Begum Akhtar lived within the cloistered environs of a typical feudal home in those days. On the one hand Shantiji was an austere Gandhian and Begum Akhtar was a person of deep indulgences. It is amazing that even Shantiji's parents never stood in her way; they never stopped her from being with her 'Ammi'. On the contrary on occasions it was Shantiji's mother who encouraged her to follow her Guru right until the end.

I feel privileged to be associated with this book, even if it has been in the capacity of a stenographer and taker of notes. Besides being a disciple and a friend of Shantiji's, my other qualification has been the fact that I was born in Lucknow too! Often during the course of our class, I have had the opportunity to hear Shantiji recount these stories. I would listen with rapt attention, as often while singing something particular, Shantiji would hark back to another time, recalling incidents with such sharp clarity, replete with dialogues that it would evoke a clear picture in the mind. I found it absolutely charming that Shantiji would have to hide her toothbrush



grew up in the feudal culture and sparkled in its aftermath; this was clearly reflected in her music. Spanning the transition from colonial times to independence was in Begum Akhtar's case a transition also from being a professional singer or bai to being the wife of a respected lawyer of Lucknow. Then she went on to become an icon in the singing world. In one way then Akhtar set her own standards, notwithstanding the constraints of the times, and emerged a stronger person and better singer. Her spontaneous and distinguished artistic style was usually combined with the language of poetry and emotions.

This is the story of Akhtari Bai Faizabadi or Begum Akhtar as I saw it and learnt from others, in conversation and from interviews with her and her husband, and close associates. The writing of this book became essential because there arose so many stories and rumours about Ammi's life. I felt I owed it to her to present to the world her life story as she narrated it to me. What she told me over the years finds place here. To me she was not only a singer but a combination of personae of all hues. She was a unique and bold character who led her life by her own convictions and principles. At times I felt like asking her about her past, but hesitated to do so, for it was her right not to speak of things that she wanted to keep private.

Over the years, I came across several people who claimed to be her students. But most of them were not around when she was alive. That is the other reason why I felt impelled to write this book. It covers the major part of Akhtar's singing career, and the vision of the singer is brought out through a series of incidents that are shared and yet unique. Akhtar's family, her contemporaries and her lifestyle all come through quite beautifully. She was in a real sense God's own very special creation, His most beloved.

Akhtar became famous not only in India, but also in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Russia where she gave concerts. Sponsored by the Indian High Commission, Ammi toured Pakistan in 1961-62 and presented a Republic Day recital in Karachi. Ammi performed in Afghanistan as part of a national cultural delegation in 1963 (where she

celebrated National Day and was invited by the Afghan King to sing Perisan ghazals in the Palace) and then U.S.S.R. in 1967. According to K. Natwar Singh, Ammi was a household name in Kabul. Almost everyone knew her popular songs – '*Ai muhabhat tere anjaam pe rona aya*.' She was presented the distinguished-artist award by the Sangeet Natak Academy, and the government of India awarded her posthumously two of the country's top honours *Padma Shri* in 1968 and *Padma Bhushan* in 1975.

Ammi was a deeply religious person and went on the Haj three times. "Be true to yourself and keep your heart clean, for only then can you be a true musician", she once told me. Ammi—as those close to Begum Akhtar called her—may not have been my real mother, but I loved and cared for her as any daughter would. It was not possible for me to ever come out of her shadow. I was completely devoted to her, and would have done anything for her.

I accompanied Ammi on many programmes for All India Radio (including the last programme which was broadcast from Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi in October 1974), and also provided vocal support during her tour of Pakistan in 1961 and during her last TV programme for Delhi Doordarshan. Thus I was able to see her from close up, a truly heaven-sent opportunity. Ammi was born into a family in which women were professional singers, known as bais. Hence prior to her marriage to Istiak Abbassi in the early 1940s she was known as Akhtari Bai; after marriage she was known as Begum Akthar. 'Begum' means 'respectable woman' and it is this respectability that Ammi searched for all her life. She wanted to be seen as someone with a status in society, to be part of a higher order, and not be identified as a singer or *tawaif*.

Ammi and her twin sister were born in 1914, but 'Bibbi', as Ammi was fondly called, lost her twin sister early on. As a young girl she is said to have had a penchant for memorizing songs, but did not take a serious interest in learning formal music, for she found it "boring". Her mother Mushtri Begum was a professional singer, and she naturally wanted Ammi to continue down the same path. Her early life was one of difficulty as the family moved from one city to another in search for economic stability.

That, of course, does not mean that she had no weaknesses. She was extremely gullible and would believe anything that anybody said. This would lead to tensions sometimes in our relationships, and it was hard to get her back on track. But that's the way she was, spontaneous and a free spirit. And though, as I look back over the years, there were times when I would blame her for not leaving anyone to take on her legacy, I can only think that for a person of her character it was perhaps best that she left it this way, passing away suddenly and leaving us all to hold her music and give it to the world. This then is her story as I witnessed it. One of her last private recordings reflects her personality very well.

Mohabat karne wale kam na honge,
Teri mehfil me lekin hum na honge.

Perhaps it would be better if I gave a detached observer's view of Ammi's singing style. G.N. Joshi, himself an accomplished vocalist of classical and light classical music writes:

> Begum Akhtar possessed all the qualities that are so vital for a good *ghazal* singer. The notes which she produced were so limpid, so hauntingly sweet, that the audience was immediately captivated. She had the uncanny knack of choosing the right kind of *ghazal* and adorning it in a befitting tune; she would render it so endearingly that her every note would grip the hearts of the audience.

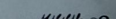
Joshi recalls an incident with Ammi when she was once recording in Bombay. He was then Auditor in disc recording with the Gramaphone Company of India (HMV). On this particular day Begum Akhtar had come and completed the recording of two bewitching *ghazals* and was getting ready for the recording of *naats* (religious songs), when Joshi's Punjabi boss walked in. "Well, Begumsab, what is it you are recording now?" he asked casually. On being told that Ammi was recording two *naats*, the officer said, with a knowledgeable air, "Look here, Begumsab, we have recorded some really good *naats* sung by famous *qawals* like Ismail Azad Qawal and Usuf Azad Qawal of Bhendi Bazaar and these records sell like hot cakes. I suggest you also sing in the same style." Joshi recalls that he was taken aback by the audacity of his boss. He says

Begum Akhtar was red and speechless with anger and indignation. "She controlled herself, and pushing the harmonium away, lit a cigarette and began smoking furiously. I immediately saw that all hopes of further recording that evening had gone up in smoke. The officer went away after a while, not even aware of his blunder. Begum Akhtar was still red in the face and was puffing at her cigarette in an agitated manner."

Joshi says he told Ammi, "Begumsab, we won't do any more recording today. I am as upset as you are. We will proceed with the recording tomorrow; please forget the incident and sing in your usual style."

"I do not know," Ammi said seething with anger and disgust, "Why did *yeh Kudhon ke Badshah* set foot inside the studio? How dare he make such silly and rude suggestions!" However, by the next morning Ammi had regained her normal poise, and Joshi met her at the Sea Green South Marine Drive hotel and brought her to complete the recording.

No better tribute to Ammi can come than from one of her closest friends Sheila Dhar. In a book published recently, Sheila writes that Ammi "flowered into almost a cult figure, an ideal personality invested with such charm and charisma that an entire generation of women passionately wished to emulate her."



کس کا خیال کون سی منزل نظر میں ہے
صدیاں گذر گئیں کہ زمانہ سفر میں ہے

Kiska khayal kaunsi manzil na
Sadiyan guzar gayin ki zamana sa

Whose thought and which destination it is that (my) eyes are
(Even though) centuries have passed, since the times are always o

BEGUM AKHTAR

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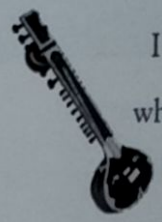


I used to live on Joplin Road in Lucknow in those days. This was in 1952 while I was still in college. Aijaz Hussein Khan Saheb of the Rampur Gharana used to come home to teach me classical music and performances on Lucknow Radio were already commonplace. In fact it was Awasthiji at the Lucknow All India Radio Station who suggested that if I learnt singing from Begum Akhtar, my craft would improve. He was the one who sent me to her.

One day after my recording was over I took a rickshaw to No. 1, Havelock Road where Begum Akhtar lived. It was close to the AIR Station. Someone told me that her house was adjacent to Raja Saheb Gopal Khera's massive compound. I took a u-turn at the Raja Saheb's *kothi* and found myself in front of a huge gate; half opened, half closed. There was a sign outside which read, "Ishtiak Ahmed Abbassi", in both Urdu and English. There was a huge untended garden to one side as soon as one entered the gate and a path leading upto the main house. As the rickshaw drew to a halt, I was filled with a sense of doubt. There was no doorbell, and I fumbled foolishly on the verandah for a while.

As I was approaching the house, the rickshaw had driven along the rear portion of the *kothi*, which was the *zenana*. The women of the house were already alerted of my arrival and were now peeping out of their rooms, or through the *chik*, trying to see who was there.

After a while a man came out. He asked me, "Who have you come to meet?"

"I am here to see Begum Saheba," I replied, mustering up all my confidence.

He looked at me narrowly, and said, "Achha, I will send word inside."

He made me sit on the verandah and disappeared. I heard a voice from one of the inner quarters.

"Who is it Babboo?"

He said, "There is a young girl. She is wearing a *salwar kameez*."

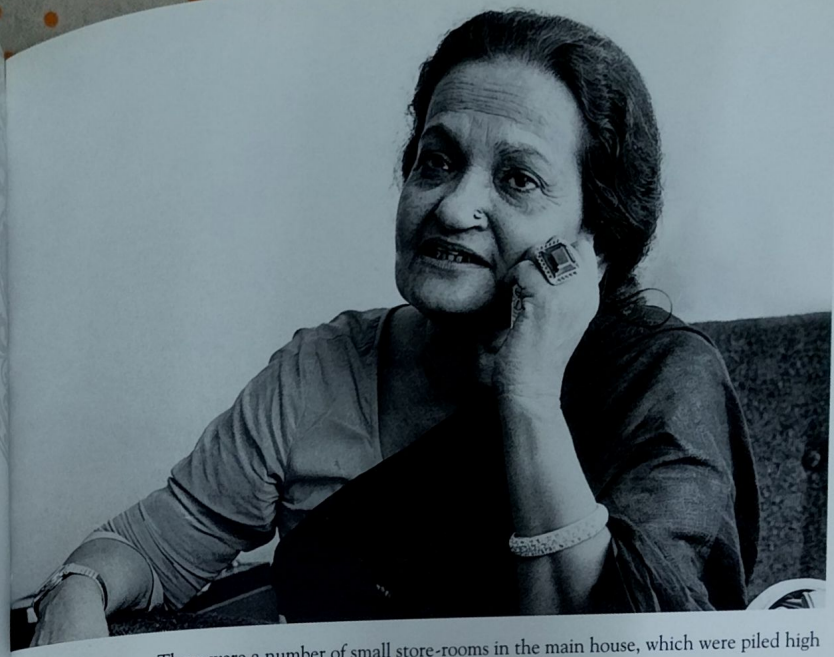
"What did you say her name was?"

"I didn't ask her name. She has two plaits and is asking for you."

"Make her sit down, I'm coming."

I looked around while waiting and saw a couple of doors leading to the house from the verandah. One seemed to lead to an office. The other led to a bedroom; not really a bedroom; in those days houses just had rooms, and the concept of space was more fluid. Any room could be transformed to fit any requirement. So the day you placed a bed in it, it became a bedroom. Begum Akhtar's house was an old *kothi*; a fading shade of yellow, with old style awnings and limestone *jaalis*.

Imagine yourself in an old *kothi*, with rooms and more rooms leading out of a central *aangan*. Then there were rooms on the side with large French-type windows. There was a large *chabootara* or sit-out, which provided a vantage point to enjoy the evening breeze. Towards the right there was a large *bawarchi khana*, or traditional kitchen, under the shade of an old and gnarled neem tree. There was an old tamarind tree as well in the compound. I still remember vividly how these trees would sway to the breeze in summer.



There were a number of small store-rooms in the main house, which were piled high with untensils, huge *degs* and *kadhais*, which were only brought out during weddings, Moharram and other ceremonial occasions. After I started coming to Begum Akhtar's house, she even had a new house built in the compound. This was supposed to be more modern than the rest of the house, but basically had one large room as you entered, behind which was another motley collection of rooms used for alternating purposes, they were dressing rooms, informal dining areas, places to lock oneself and sulk in! The rooms could become pretty much what you wanted them to be.

Suddenly she came and stood before me. Begum Akhtar was a petite woman. Her clothes were somewhat crushed as if she had just woken up from sleep. She was wearing a pair of high heels. Later I saw that she always wore high heels. She would wear them even around the house. She looked at me and said,

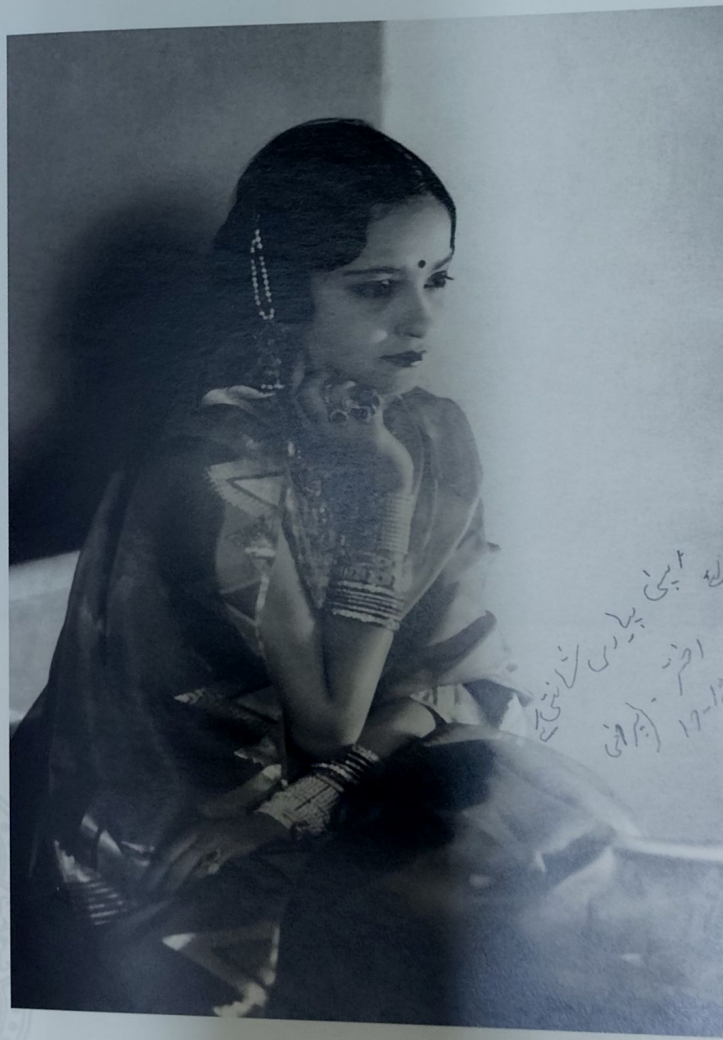
"What is it, *bitiya*?"

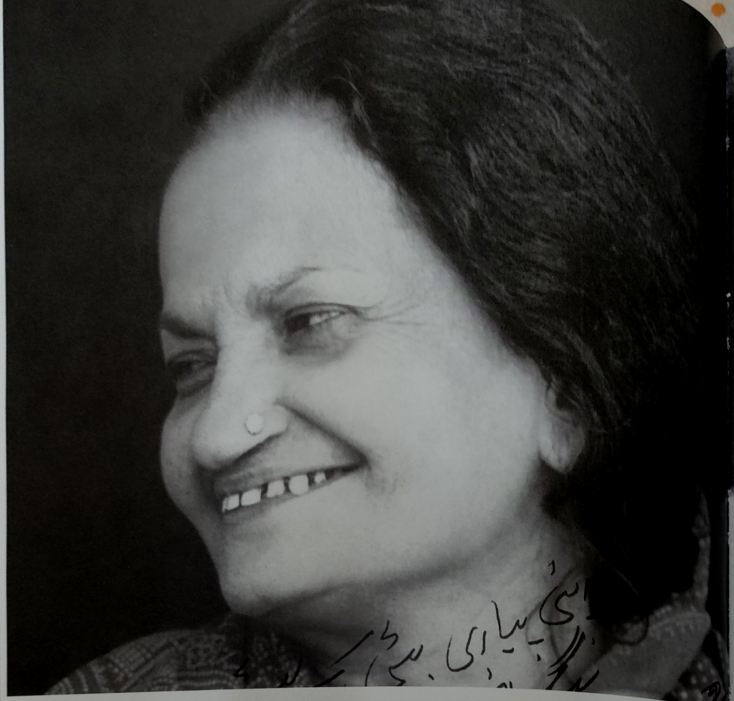
"Awasthiji asked me to see you, I am Shanti," I said with hesitation.

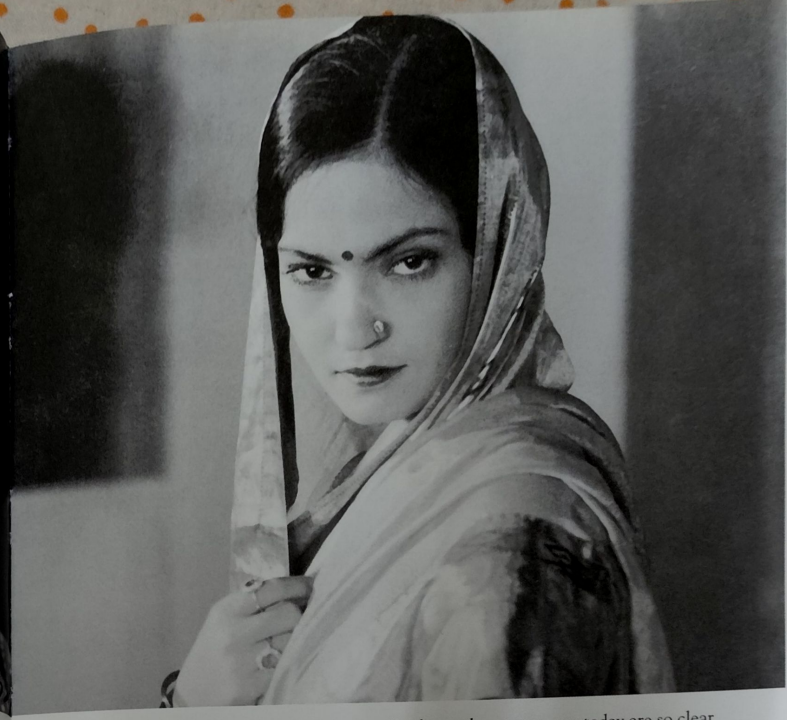
"Yes, yes, of course, of course. Do sit. Aye Babboo, bring her some tea."

She asked me to wait for her and disappeared inside. After a while I saw a Vauxhaul drive out of the house and saw that Abbassi Saheb was in it, smartly turned out in his legal attire, black tie and all. His *munshiji* was seated behind him. After the car had gone, she came back and took me into the house. We walked across four huge rooms and came to a large *aangan*. There was a verandah to one side, and other rooms leading out from there. She took me to one of the rooms and pulled out a harmonium from beneath one of the antique beds. She threw aside a beautiful red chenille cover and asked me to sing something.

I was really tense. Though I had heard of her, I wasn't so familiar with her music. She was already well known as Akhtari Bai Faizabadi. But in the kind of society I lived in, i.e. the business circles, people either discussed money or weights and measures. They never talked much about music. Fortunately, my parents were extremely liberal-minded and insisted on a strong academic grounding for all the children of the house. I was very fond of music and they always encouraged that. But at my first meeting with Begum Akhtar I had no clue what to sing. Somehow, my throat just went dry and I just couldn't sing. Just then a little girl came and started staring at me from one of the doors that led into the verandah. Then another peeked at us through the curtains. Begum Akhtar dismissed them at once. "Out with the two of you," she commanded; they fled the scene at once.







Then she coaxed me into singing, pushing the harmonium towards me. I pressed the *shadaj* and *madhyama* notes, since I couldn't play the instrument in those days, and began singing a bhajan in raag *pilu*, *"Baso mere nainan mein Nandlal"*. To tell the truth I had no idea what raag *pilu* was. I had just learnt the bhajan as one would learn any filmi song. Since I was performing on radio at the time, I was used to the radio station sending me songs, set to a particular tune, and I would just go and record them. I also did a lot of choral singing. I had a high-pitched voice, and could sing loudly.

When I finished, Begum Saheba looked at me and said in a somewhat surprised sort of way, "You sing pretty well! What do you want to learn from me?"

I really didn't know what to say. Students who come to me today are so clear about their goals. They are so focused, they immediately tell me what they want to learn from me, which *ghazal*, which *bandish*, etc. I mumbled something about Mr. Awasthi having sent me there. Besides that I had no idea about her music or what I wanted to learn from her. I told her that I was a *kora kagaz*, a blank piece of paper on which she could write whatever music she wished.

That was the turning point in my life. She could have refused me then and said that she didn't have the time to take me on, but she didn't. She asked me to come back the next day. My rickshaw man, Haider, was waiting for me. I got into the rickshaw and on my way home fixed up with him to pick me up the next day as well.

next day, she was still asleep, so they made me wait in the verandah. It was a little awkward. But Begum Akhtar's adopted sister Shammo kept me company. She was really inquisitive about where I came from, what my parents did and where I lived. I was uncomfortable sharing any information with her at the time. But fortunately Ammi woke up soon. When she was told that a young girl was waiting for her, I heard her say, "Oh, yes. Call her in here." She requested me to wait for her while she quickly freshened up, she came out, lit a cigarette, and our first class commenced.

We started my training with *paltas* in *raag Tilang*. I noticed that she herself was quite keen to join me in my practice. It had been quite some time since she had sung this freely herself. She had lost her mother in 1950, and Abbassi Saheb had allowed her to resume her music in a bid to bring her out of her terrible depression. She had renewed her contacts at the Radio Station.

In fact that was where I saw her for the first time. I had noticed her long flowing hair twisted into a plait. She used to wear short *mulmul* kurtis, which are in fashion again, with long flowing standing.

When she and Abbassi Saheb moved into the new house, Shammo and her family continued to live in the older quarters. And so did Jhamman Mamu, Shama, and others all part of Ammi's extended family. Nobody knew who Jhamman Mamu was or where he came from. Ammi had inherited him from her mother's establishment. He was a professional storyteller. It was his job to sit on a chair in the courtyard, and tell us stories by day and again at night. Ammi couldn't sleep without hearing his scary tales.

They would all sleep on *takhts* and cots in the open courtyard. There would be huge blasting exhaust fans set to shake up the still summer nights. Often Ammi and Abbu would lie in the centre of the courtyard, like the sun and the moon, and as if in

Ammi's clothes, keep the *dhobi* diaries, the tailor's accounts, she would give instructions for the kitchen, order the household groceries, and plan out the menus, etc. Though she had been married into a family in Dhaka, Ammi never let her go to her husband's home, the same way she never let Shammo leave with Munne Khan, the person who accompanied her on the *tabla* for the best part of her life.

Ammi and Abbu had planned on shifting to Dhaka after the partition. This was sometime in 1948. But eventually they dropped the idea. While they were on a visit to Dhaka during those days, they had visited the family that Shama had been promised to, and Ammi immediately took a dislike to them. She was convinced that they would ill-treat Shama. Besides, since they weren't going there anymore, she decided against sending Shama all the way, to be on her own. It was just another instance of how her *laad* (love) held so many of us captive.

Everyone in the household looked up to Shama. And, she was quite efficient in her own way. I shudder to think how that house would have run in her absence. We got along quite well. Since both of us were attending college, it made a huge difference. After taking her M.A. exams, she even took up a job at the Government Information Bureau.

Although the rest of the house was maintained in a haphazard way, Ammi's formal drawing room was grand. She loved to live in style and had the ceilings painted in blue and silver, with a stunning effect. There were large mirrors all around and massive chandeliers of

different hues. She had a great taste for the luxuries of life, be it beautiful clothes, objects d'art, perfumes, Belgian glass, chandeliers or cars. She was quick to catch on to the latest trends in these things. There were expensive silverware displays, *paan* boxes, *khaasdaans*, perfume dispensers, bowls, plates and trays. A number of curios she had collected in her travels were carelessly strewn around the room. Though the house had none of the poshness that one associated with the Brown sahebs and Britishers, it did reflect a certain charm of a bygone era.

The other rooms had huge *takhts*, which served practically every purpose. There were sofas too, but most of their covers were faded. It was not as if she didn't care, she did instruct her staff to do the dusting and cleaning, and they weren't trained enough to handle such sophisticated jobs. In later years she would often ask me to do up the drawing room if any important guests were coming to dinner. I would do the dusting myself and arrange flowers on the mantlepiece. I would display her curios elegantly, the way I had seen it done in my own house. She was proud of the fact that I had such fine tastes in these things. This was something for which I must thank my mother.

In the meantime, our lessons commenced in right earnest. She made me do the scales over and over again. She would advise me to continue practising them at home as well. At the time I didn't realize how important this was, but now I know this is the most important thing you can do to build your voice and train it well. We would be going over the scales and suddenly she would pick up the thread of a *thumri*. When she first brought it up, I didn't even know what a *thumri* was! But she didn't bother with any introductions; she just threw me right into it. Slowly she began to unravel each note that went in to constructing the song. It would be mesmerizing, as we would pick up each note on our way up the scale, gradually building up to a

crescendo. I would just follow her lead. Even later when I started accompanying her on stage and she would ask me to take over a phrase, I would only play around with the same notes that she had introduced in the performance thus far. I would never have the temerity to sing a higher note on the scale; my respect for her would prevent me from that.

Within no time she was teaching me the nuances of *thumri*, *ghazal* and other *bandishes* as well. I cannot say I understood their full import then, but as the time went by, her style was infused in me, effortlessly.

Slowly as we grew familiar with each other, she would suddenly stop the class for a cigarette break. She would call out to Babboo to get us some tea. Sometimes she would give orders to somebody to buy the grocery, vegetables, mutton and *kharboozas*, in the middle of the class itself, while the *taanpura* wept tunefully in the background. At other times she would remember some odd job and go away to do it, without even a word. Then it used to be anybody's guess when she would come back, if she would come back! Sometimes she would sing a *bandish* or a *thumri* for ten-fifteen minutes, lose interest in it

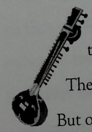
completely and take up another song. Sometimes she would take a two-line *dadra* and sing for an entire day…alternately weeping tears of transient joy and the deepest sorrow. I remember she was singing this particular *dadra*, *"Abke sawan ghar aaja…"*, when she burst into tears and I was extremely awkward, not knowing exactly how to respond. She dried her tears after a while and said to me, "You are too young to understand these things."

Often I would arrive to find Ammi with a *jhadoo* in hand, trying to shoo away the twittering birds that would come in through the ventilators in the room. She used to complain that they disturbed her *riyaaz*. It was such an endearing habit of hers; she would be in tears, swearing at them, *"Aye, yeh kambakht chidiye! jaatein bhi nahin"* (These damn birds refuse to go!).

She was a woman of many moods and no one could tell when she would decide to do what. On some days I would arrive and she would say, "Shanto *bitiya*, I don't feel like singing today. Let it be." Then we would just sit and talk and drink tea and relax. But I never missed out on going to her place even once. I had become quite friendly with Shammo's little girls by then. In fact so many of them were born in front of me.

One day when I came for the class, I was taken aback by the mayhem in the *zenana* courtyard. Ammi was standing outside and the entire household was bustling about with water, towels, sheets, etc. I was not sure what I was supposed to do, when one of the women said to me, "Shammo is having another one!" It was so casual. The doors to her room were closed, so we just sat down on the verandah and waited for the good news. This became a routine in time, because Shammo had countless children. She produced a child practically every ninth month. Shammo was Ammi's adopted sister. But she was a completely illiterate woman. She had first been married to Munne Khan, Ammi's *tabalchi*. And she had two children by him, Billoo and Bunting, namely, Naseem Akhtar and Hassan Akhtar. When Munne Khan insisted

that Shammo would have to live with him as he was not prepared to be a *ghar jamai*, Ammi got them divorced and married her off to someone from the local Masjid. Chikko was this man's daughter. Then came Mukhtar Ahmed. He willingly complied with Ammi's wishes and moved into the house. He was a bit of an opportunist. Through all this change Shammo did not protest even once. She seemed to have no mind of her own, and simply complied with every wish of Ammi's. I remember a couple of times watching her interact coyly with Munne Khan long after their separation. It seemed obvious that given a choice she might have left to keep house for him. But Ammi had put an end to that.



Since Ammi didn't have any children, she doted on Shammo's children, to the extent of spoiling them. They used to call her Nani respectfully. The two elder ones had been admitted to the Loretto Convent, Lucknow. But on a rainy day she would hug them to her breast and tell them to bunk school because it was raining. On a sunny day it was too hot for them to step out. In the winter, it was too cold to wake them up in the morning. She thus ensured that they never attended school. I often chided her for spoiling them, but she was determined to do everything in her power to do just that. Both she and Abbassi Saheb loved these children as their own. There was Billoo, Bunting, Shaheen and Nahid, whom we called Chikko and Dolly. Dolly was also lovingly called Dallo. Then there were Mikko, Guddu, Hajju, Munni, Haddo and innumerable others, whose names were differentiated only by the hair's breadth of a syllable. So many of them died at birth. There was a permanent midwife in Ammi's employ, Mrs. Paul, a thin and scrawny Christian woman who seemed to be permanently chewing paan.

No story of Ammi's can be complete without describing exactly how she would keep her *rozaa*, the religious fast observed during the holy month of Ramzaan. She would invariably fast only for eight to ten days. She couldn't resist her cigarette for more than that much time. There would be utter chaos in the house on the days she

fasted. *Khichdi* would be prepared only for the little children at lunchtime. I would also fast with the rest of the houshold. The day would pass somehow or the other, but once it was two or three in the afternoon she would start getting agitated. "Why isn't the food ready?" She would start shouting at everyone. "Why isn't anybody doing anything about it?" She would almost be in tears with anxiety.

"Ammi, don't worry, it will be ready soon." I would assure her.

The food was no ordinary spread either. There had to be light *phulkis*, or *pakoras* as snacks to break the fast, followed by an elaborate meal, desserts and the works. No sooner was it 6.30 and the *azaan* was called out; then the *iftaar* would be announced. She would quickly read her *namaaz* while still standing, have a cup of tea and immediately light up a cigarette. After a couple of cigarettes she would read her *namaaz* again in a more relaxed way, and then sit down to enjoy the sumptuous spread.

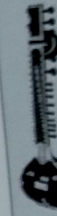
Heaven help us if Ammi decided to cook the *iftaar* delicacies herself, to shower us all with her affections! That would be the day. You could be sure that nothing would be ready until late in the evening. She would insist that the ceremonial *degs* were pulled out of the godowns, a new *chulha* would materialize out of nowhere! All of us girls would be employed to do the menial tasks like chopping the onions, potatoes, tomatoes, cleaning the garlic, grinding the fresh coriander and spices—it was like being at a mela—while the queen would sit ceremonially at the fire, stirring the curries! When we finally ate, the food would be delicious. We would all have to applaud noisily, for she was really a fabulous cook. She was good at a number of things. Surprisingly, she was extremely talented at the womanly skills like cooking, knitting and stitching. Once she put her mind to it she could do anything. For instance she had the dubious distinction of being an expert at putting knots in quilts. In fact people from all over Lucknow would request her to do their quilts. The only problem was that she never took any of these things seriously. Except when it caught her fancy, or when she really wanted to impress someone!

She would make us clean out the whole house before Id. We would spread out new bedspreads and table linen. In fact Shama would be stitching late into the night, embroidering linen and sewing new clothes. The entire house would wear a festive look. All the family members would be given new clothes to wear. Even I would get a new *gharara* to wear for the occasion. Ammi and Abbu would hand out *Idi* to all of us. Ammi would insist that I wear some jewellery and make-up on Id. Otherwise her constant complaint was that I was an old woman!

I remember when I had just started going to learn from Ammi, I wasn't a very religious person. But I used to regularly visit the Temple on *Janmashtami*. I remember on that occasion I had saved a portion of the *prasad* for Ammi and I was keen to give it to her. To my surprise, she accepted the *prasad* with great reverence and said, "Krishna is the God of love, and anyone who doesn't love Krishna cannot possibly sing!" I was completely taken aback. This was something I was not prepared for. But soon I saw that she would receive guests on both Holi and Diwali. It is not as if she actually played with colour, but she would like to be anointed with *Gulal* on Holi. And on Diwali she would see to it that large oil lamps were lit at Havelock Road. She was broadminded in that sense.

Apparently her ancestors had been Hindus and Brahmins at that. They had converted to Islam only a couple of generations ago, because of childlessness in the family. One of her grand uncles, I forget who, felt impelled to take a vow once he was blessed with a child after having walked on his knees under a *tazia* procession during Moharram.

Later I even met a Panditji who was on call at her residence. He would come and tell Ammi her fortune on a regular basis. He would also be called in during emergencies. And a lot of tasks were only initiated on his advice. As soon as the Panditji arrived there would be an announcement which rang through the house, "Ammi, Ammi, the Panditji is here!"



She would seriously ask him, " Tell me something Panditji…"

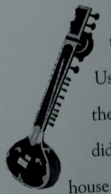
And he would pull out the almanac and start off, "As I was telling you, your stars are placed in such and such house, etc ... You must do this. But avoid this … don't start a new venture on these dates…" He had a high-pitched, slightly nasal voice.

I used to enjoy these charades in those days, because I never took these things seriously.

Then there was Sham Sunder, the electrician, who was a permanent fixture. Whether it was the fans that needed to be repaired, or bulbs changed, or festival decoration, like the Imambara on Moharram or the Id lighting or any marriage in the extended family, Sham Sunder would always be there. Marriages always remind me of how Ammi got Billoo married to this little servant girl of the household, Nazuk. Nazuk had a lovely voice. She would pick up Ammi's songs and sing them with ease, while doing her chores. Ammi took a liking to this young girl and forced her to marry Shammo's eldest son, Billoo. The poor girl was really unhappy being married to him. She was, as her name suggested, petite and frail. Billoo, as his name suggested, was a big fat bully. Soon they separated. And Ammi found him another young girl to marry!

During Moharram we would all uniformly observe mourning. It was understood that nobody would wear bright colours. We wouldn't go out for movies or shop for new things in the period. Nobody would wear green-coloured slippers or shoes ever. There was also a strict moratorium on laughing loudly. Ammi would religiously read the Marsia every day while we would sit around observing pin drop silence. She would in fact observe Moharram in the Shia style, where the mourning is more intense and physical, as compared to the Sunni style, where it is more controlled and subtle.

One room would be dedicated to the *tazia* decoration. Huge *alams* would carry the supposed war banners to recreate the scene of the Battle of Karbala. She would get copious amounts of food prepared on the 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th days and have it distributed among the poor. Nobody would ever go back hungry from her gates on those days. She would do this without fail, ensuring that she was back from her travels to observe this ritual mourning for the martyr Hazrat Imam Hussain. On the tenth day the *tazia* would leave the house before noon and be symbolically buried at Karbala. All through the sombre ceremony, Ammi would sob softly and gently beat her breast to express her deep anguish. Then the room where the *tazia* had been kept for the past ten days would be ritually washed with holy water.



Chhuttan Bhaiyya and Babban Bhaiyya are some of the other names that come back to me from that time. The latter was Naushad Saheb's Ustad and was a goldmine of fabulous *bandishes*. Whenever he came over, there would always be an informal *baithak* in his honour. Chhuttan Bhaiyya didn't sing but would come every day and do all the odd jobs around the house. Their sister was a professional singer who used to live in the Ameenabad area of Lucknow.

Another regular at the house was Benazir Khala. She had a beautiful voice. Her sister Zohra was a dancer. Benazir had then just become the second begum of Hakim Amin. Because of this she had gone into *pardah* and given up singing professionally. But I had a chance to hear her during our informal get-togethers and her voice was mesmerizing. Zohra had married Lalloo Babu Bhargav, a Hindu, who ran a printing press.

In those days Abbassi Saheb had some quarters in a beautiful haveli in Nayagaon in Lucknow, which was known as "Mateen Manzil". It was a huge haveli with big airy rooms and large verandahs and sit-outs. His own ancestral home, Ehsaan Manzil, was just across the road from there. But it was to Mateen Manzil that Abbassi Saheb brought his Begum after their marriage. The haveli belonged to Abbassi Saheb's former father-in-law, Mateen Saheb, who was his maternal uncle as well. Mateen Saheb had paid for Abbu's entire education abroad and for this Abbu was beholden

to him. His first wife, Ayesha, was a very sickly woman and had died soon after he returned from abroad.

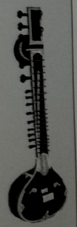
After her death, Mateen Saheb had made the house out in Abbassi Saheb's name until he survived, with the understanding that it would revert to his family after his death.

Naturally, when Ammi went to this house after getting married, the entire family looked down upon her. She and Abbu occupied the ground floor, and his elder brother's family lived on the first floor. Raffo, her mother, Khatoon Bitiya, Sharaf Mian, their sister-in-law, Asif Bitiya, and sundry cousins of Abbassi Saheb all lived close-by.

Abbu would leave for the High Court early in the morning, and Ammi would be alone through the day. She would visit her mother sometimes, but that was about it. Her in-laws insulted her right, left and center often pretending that she didn't exist. But such were Ammi's charming ways that within a couple of years of moving there, the entire family was eating out of her hands.

Abbu's elder brother was a Prime Minister in Bhopal. He had practically abandoned his wife and children in Nayagaon. Ammi ensured that these girls, Salma and Amina, had truly grand weddings. She herself undertook most of the expenses, showering them with gifts and her own jewellery. The family couldn't believe that after having insulted her so bitterly, she bore no animosity towards them. They took their hats off to her. And in time she earned the interesting sobriquet of *Achhi Ammi*. Not only did they accept her as a mother figure, but a good mother at that. They were proud of her achievements and there came a time when they wouldn't do a thing without consulting her first. Soon after this Abbu bought the Havelock Road *kothi* and the two of them moved there. So eventually their quarters in Mateen Manzil lay vacant.

Now Lalloo Bhargav, Zohra Khala's husband, desperately needed space to run his press. He requested Ammi for permission to use their quarters in Mateen Manzil. This happened sometime in the 1960s, much after I had started going to her. Ammi as usual requested Abbu, and in no time, Benazir Khala, Zohra Khala and their respective spouses moved in from their cramped accomodations in Naqkhas to Mateen Manzil, ostensibly to run a press. Naturally Ammi's in-laws didn't appreciate



this. And this did lead to some amount of bitterness. But Benazir and Zohra's families continue to live there to this day.

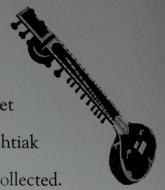
It hurts me to remember how these families, who were so close in Ammi's times, had bitter misunderstandings after Ammi's death. There were stories of gang wars, perpetrated by members from both sides. The little children whom Ammi loved and spoiled, whom she never sent to school, grew up on the streets. Knowing little else in life, they took to the ways of the streets and in no time became gangsters. Haddo was killed. One of Benazir's grandsons was killed.

Mukhtar belonged to a family of singers. But for all his gentle mannerisms, Mukhtar was also a well-known goonda from Unnao, and little else was to be expected from his children. He had even gone to the extent of announcing one day, "What do I care for this black cow, Shammo? I had been attracted to the green pastures here! If I want I can even take this Bunting (Shammo's daughter from Munne Khan) as my wife…but I am an honourable man!"

Guddu and Hajju soon developed a reputation in the area. After Abbu's death they even got Shama thrown out of the house. She told me that she returned home from work to find all her things lying on the road. The poor woman had to move into a small quarter in the Chowk area. Even Abbu had died a broken man.

According to the Muslim Law, the royalty and other property belonging to a woman went to the husband. Naturally Mukhtar wanted the entire amount of the pending royalty from H.M.V. to come to Shammo or himself. Abbu used to tell me that they dragged him to court, and that he, a Barrister at Law, who had once commanded such respect in the courts, was reduced to defending himself like a common criminal. I don't know what the truth is anymore.

I am told that after Abbu passed away, the first thing they did was to get rid of the white board which proudly announced the house belonged to "Ishtiak Ahmed Abbassi" and one by one sell off every beautiful thing Ammi had collected.



There was a piece of land that Ammi had bought in the Chowk area, where her mother was buried, surrounded by lush open fields. It was in Thakurganj, next to Pasand Bagh and close to the famous Jinnad Mosque in the Chowk. It was said that Djinns came and offered prayers at this mosque. Ammi would often go to this *Bagh* to relax. She would sit out in the open and watch the wheat being cut or simply have the vegetables picked according to her choice. She would always say that this was the only place in Lucknow that gave her peace. In fact she wanted her mortal remains to be placed here, alongside her mother's. I remember sitting next to her on those fields and enviously telling her, "Ammi you have chosen such a beautiful resting place. I wish I could be buried next to you!"

She was very upset with me. She sternly told me, "*Kabhi Nahin*, don't you ever say such a thing. You are a Hindu and you will be burnt on a pyre. That is how it should be. One must never go against one's own religion. A man who changes his religion is worse than a two-faced dog! You are very nice as you are. You will always be there in my heart, why do you need to share this piece of earth with me?"

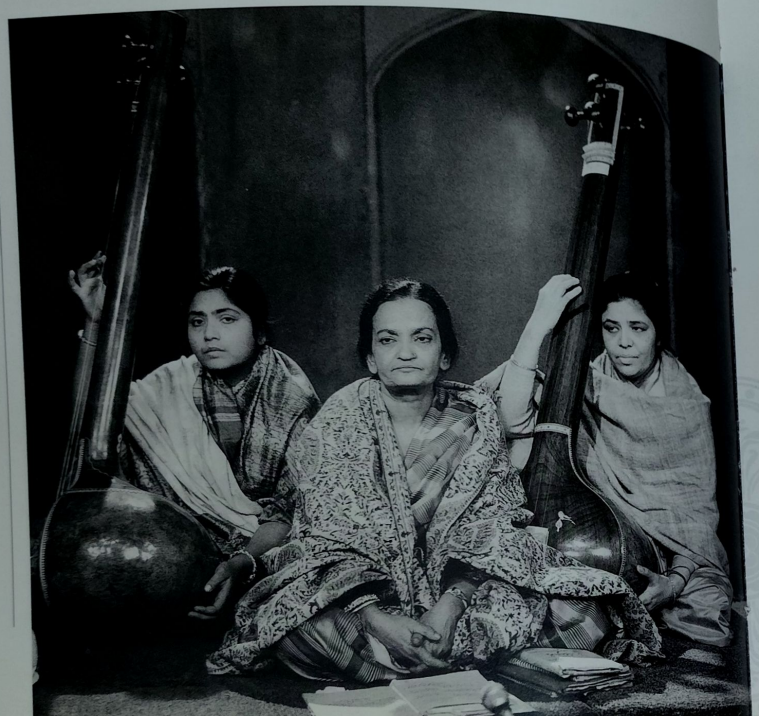
These open fields had already been portioned off and sold during Abbu's time, as the money was falling short, since he no longer had any Zamindari cases after the Zamindari Abolition Act in 1952. And Abbu was loath to live off Ammi's income.

After they both died, the family sold it all off, save the small plot, where she and her mother lie. It is difficult to even approach this spot today. One has to actually go through other people's homes, or look down from someone's balcony to even locate it. I don't think anybody even bothers to clean the area. It is so sad to think how the same world which once revolved exclusively around Ammi changed track completely once she died.

A friend of mine, Sarla, who was in the Information Ministry in Lucknow in those days, suggested that we involve the government and put the area under government protection as a monument. The local government was keen to do

something in her memory, as they were greatly beholden to Ammi for her contribution to the city of Lucknow. They even suggested they would make a pukka road right up to the monument. The matter was even discussed in Delhi. And right noises could be heard for a while, but Abbassi Saheb felt that the land had rightfully been left to the children and so he never gave his consent and ultimately the plan had to be shelved.

One of Shammo's daughters called me up in Delhi one day out of the blue, long after Ammi and Abbu had died. She said, "Shanti *apa*, you had once said you wanted Ammi's harmonium. Are you still interested?"



I was taken aback by her sudden generosity, because when I had asked her about it on a previous occasion she had feigned total ignorance as to its whereabouts. In fact I had even asked her for my own Tanpura, which I had bought in Miraj and left in Ammi's care, but even that they couldn't find. So I simply said, "Yes, well, that's true…"

"Well then please bring me one lakh rupees by tomorrow and it is yours, otherwise there is this firangi gentleman who is quite keen to have it!" And to think that this girl was born in front of me! She used to run around me as a child shouting, 'Shanti *apa*, Shanti *apa*'. I had devised games to entertain her, combed her hair for school, and she had the guts to turn around and say these things to me.

It was so futile. "I don't have that kind of resources. You give it to whosoever you wish. Whatever Ammi had to give me, she has already given me," I said to her bitterly. I felt so bad. She shamelessly agreed and put the phone down.

Then I heard rumours that they even sold off the Havelock Road house. My friend Sarla Sahni had got a non-governmental organisation to start a Chikan embroidery unit there. She had done this because she wanted to help the family earn some money by way of rentals and sale. But they were so ungrateful that they soon took over the staff and resources of the unit and started the business secretly from elsewhere. After that I stopped keeping in touch. I also heard that they had opened an antique shop within the premises of the house. All the beautiful chandeliers that Ammi had collected over the years, all the priceless silver she had received as gifts from royal families, her jewellery, anything and everything they could put a price on was disposed off. Soon they were also passing off all manner of mirrors and chandeliers as Ammi's, and making a premium on it.

When I go to Lucknow now, especially after Shammo and Mukhtar' death, I always make it a point to visit Ammi's *kabr* and dust and swab it according to tradition, but I don't see the point in visiting Havelock Road anymore.

Years ago, I remember when I told Babubhai and Arvind Bhai, Ammi's closest friends in Bombay, of the dire neglect of her grave, they offered to have a permanent structure built at their own cost. Their only condition was that I should take charge of the project. Mukhtar was alive at that point of time, so I called him and apprised him of their plans. His immediate reaction was, "Why don't you tell them to send me the money? I will get the job done. After all we are her kith and kin…shouldn't we be the ones to take care of her final resting place?" In the end the money that was intended for her tomb was put into a trust, as was a lot of royalty money, which in the absence of a clear title, people didn't know who to give to.

She lived a haphazard life and she died a haphazard death. I sometimes feel so angry with her. I feel it was all her fault that things are the way they are today. She left no legacy, not even one person who was worthy enough to carry forward her name. Not even one of Shammo's children could ever match up to her. While Ammi had striven her entire life to earn her respectability the hard way, these people frittered it away in seconds. To think that there was a time at Bunting's wedding when the entire who's who of Lucknow and representatives from most princely states had come to this house to felicitate the newly weds, it was a big comedown for Akhtari Manzil at Havelock Road.

I feel such intense anger and most of it is directed towards Ammi for having let it all slip through her fingers. Yet she was who she was, and if she hadn't been the way she was, she wouldn't have achieved half of what she did.

How my mind digresses! Coming back to my lessons, in a few months Ammi had started insisting that I only leave after eating lunch with the family. And I would ever obey her command. Meals at Havelock Road would be prepared early in the morning, before Abbu left for his office. There would always be the staple *dal* and *chawal*, along with some kababs and a special type of Roghani roti, which was soft and delicious, and would be eaten through the day. I was a strict vegetarian when I first came here. When Ammi heard that, she asked me, "You don't eat *gosht*? How will you get the energy to sing?" So one day, while we were eating together she took a piece of chicken from her own plate and put it in my mouth. I accepted it as a *prasad*. It didn't offend me one bit that she had done so. She realized then that I had accepted her as my guru in totality. She too accepted me as her daughter. In fact a number of tongues would wag in those days, alleging that I was her illegitimate daughter. We would just laugh away these rumours.

Our practice had become more intense by now. We would sing together for hours. At other times I would just end up tending house for her. By now I had almost become a member of the house. I'd be scurrying to the kitchen and back during meals. If it was time for Abbu to leave for the court, Ammi would instruct me to organize his breakfast, while she caught up on the day's programme with him.

After a while she started holding me back until the evening. And then on occasion, when there was an official dinner or something, she would call up my mother, "*Bhabhi*, I'm holding Shanto back. She'll come back home tomorrow." My mother, who had no qualms, would simply say, "Do as you please, she is your daughter. Who am I to say anything?"

Later, when I started accompanying her out of town, to Bombay for instance, she would call up similarly and inform my mother that we were going to Bombay. It would be anybody's guess when we would be coming back. My mother wouldn't blink an eyelid. We would be away for months. In fact she ran a parallel establishment in Bombay, because the day we would land, the Hotel suite at Sea Green South Hotel on Marine Drive would be ready and waiting for us, so would her regular maid and other sundry staff. And I must say that Ammi would take care of everything so smoothly. She footed all my expenses, right from my train tickets to my hotel rooms,

taxi expenses, etc. I never even had to pay a pie for my lessons. She was that generous. It is a fact that she never cared much for money. She earned by the fistfuls and lavished it all on her near and dear ones.

When I look back, I realize that my mother too was a strong woman in her own right. And she had such complete faith in me. All this wouldn't have been possible without her. There were times when I returned after midnight from Havelock Road. There were times when I felt indignant to return because of some silly or imagined slight. But my mother stood firm. She told me that once I had accepted Ammi as my guru, I should go to her come what may.

I remember that Ammi on her part would feel so grateful to my mother for letting me spend so much time with her, that during my sisters' weddings, she would come over like a relative and take over some job. She would get Chhuttan Bhaiyya involved in the flower decorations and end up making the *paan ki giloris* herself and handing them out to astounded guests! I remember when my father died, she sat up all night with my mother, until I arrived from Delhi the next morning. These are gestures that one cannot easily forget.

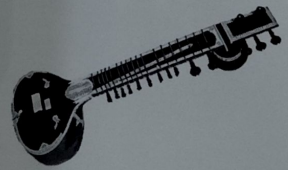
Ammi was fond of new and beautiful things, be it a new sari, a new slipper or a new person. She loved to surround herself with the new and the exotic. There was no rationale or logic to her behaviour. She was like that. Whether anybody else cared a damn, once she was taken up with something, there was no looking back. She was quite taken up with me in those days. I was a novelty for her. Besides, she was very proud of the fact that I was educated. She took pains to tell everyone she knew, that I went to college and was pursuing a Masters degree, and that I was not from your average singing background.

Soon it was "Shanto, what do you think of this…Shanto what do you say, should we do it that way…Shanto come here and check this! Where are you Shanto? You come and sit here with me." Often we would go for movies together, the entire "Havelock Road clan". Needless to say, I was always expected to accompany them. It was exhilarating for me to be wanted so, and she enjoyed my sage council even in the most trivial things. "Shanto which sari should I wear?" or "Shanto is this shoe matching?" Other times she would instruct me, "*Bitiya* go deposit this bill!" There was nothing she didn't ask me to do. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her.

And since the household revolved around her whims and fancies, I became the flavour of the season at Havelock Road.

نظر نواز نظاروں میں جی نہیں لگتا ------

Nazar Nawaz Nazaron mein jee nahi lagta…
My heart is restless even amid (such) eye-soothing landscapes…

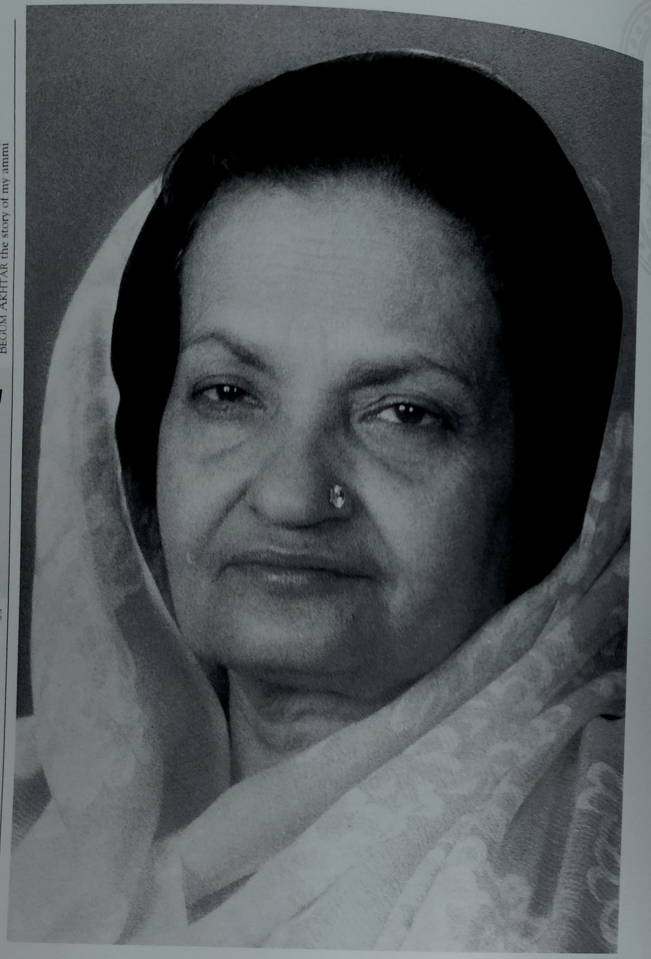


SECLUSION

I was the flavour of the season at Havelock Road. But soon the season changed and it wasn't always spring; other students started to come. And with each new student I felt a little distance developing between Ammi and me. She would be taken up with the new person for a while, whether or not the candidate was deserving of her attention.

When I first started coming, she had one other student. He used to come in once in a while, a shy Sardarji by the name of Balwant Singh. He was a contractor who had expressed a desire to learn from her. She would not let anyone down. He was a quiet man who would come and go almost unnoticed.

The first new and serious contender to my Ammi's affections was a senior ICS officer's daughter. Anjali was then hardly seventeen. She hadn't even started going to college then. She used to attend Loretto Convent in those days. She had a lovely voice. Her father was a friend of Abbassi Saheb. Both Ammi and Abbu were fond of making friends in high places. Besides the fact that Abbu belonged to a well-connected family, Ammi too had her own share of admirers in high society. It was at Abbassi Saheb's behest that this new girl started training under Ammi.



In time we were the only two students of Ammi who tied a *ganda* to solemnize our relationship as guru-shishya. It so happened that Neelam Bai, a singer from Bombay, was visiting Ammi. When she saw us learning from her, she took up the issue of *shagirdi* with Ammi, "What is this Akhtari?" she addressed her with familiarity, "If you are teaching them, they should be bound to you. Otherwise what's the use (of your taking such pains in teaching them)?"

So it was she who ensured that Anjali and I became Ammi's *ganda-bandh shagirds*. Munne Khan took the responsibility of tying our *ganda*. The students who came in later were never anointed thus. So it was our privilege. The sacred ritual ensured that the guru and the shishya were bound to each other during the period of training. It is like signing a bond. Both the student and the teacher had an equal responsibility to nurture this relationship. It was the teacher's right to teach the student without withholding any knowledge from him or her, and the student's duty to learn with sincerity. One was not free to do anything against the teacher's wishes.

Ammi believed in the maxim, "*Har kooza nemat*", that every earthen pot had an inherent capacity to contain untold treasures. That it is the guru's duty to teach each student to the best of his or her capacity, and let the student soar. The student took the knowledge given by the guru as a blessing. If the student for some reason enjoyed even greater success than the guru, then so be it. She even told me that those teachers who hide things from their students were doing disservice to the guru-shishya relationship.

A lot of people often ask me how things have changed in the system of giving *taleem* since those days. My understanding is that in those days there was a total dedication and deep love for the guru, which infused one's learning process with enthusiasm. Besides this, perseverance was an important aspect too. Gurus would

make it a point to test their favourite students, going to the extent of not teaching them for long spells to test their dedication to the art. But today what I see is a complete commercialization of this industry. Things have come to such a state that with media hype and big money even an average artist can aspire to a star status. Anybody has access to a recording studio these days, and overnight we have seen a tide of popular music hit our music world. Whereas on the one hand this is a very positive development, it has also resulted in very few genuine artists entering the classical field who are willing to carry forward the torch of our *paramparagat* classical music. For the rest of the world the quick money in popular music is too tempting to ignore. Most of these artists wouldn't have the patience to put up with a guru's idiosyncracies.

Besides, in those days one didn't have the freedom to flit from one teacher to another, as is the fashion these days. This ritual had an extremely positive effect on a student, as it provided him/her with a clear focus.

Then there used to be the standard practice of taking a *chilla*. This was undertaken when the guru or *ustad* felt that the student was ready to perform on stage. During the *chilla*, a student didn't step out of the house for forty days at a stretch. The guru was bound by the *chilla* too. Both the teacher and the student would practice round the clock and at the end of the forty days, the teacher would present his student on stage. A student didn't have the guts to accept offers to perform publicly before this. Even after the formal debut, students would always have to take permission from their gurus before performing. Needless to say, Ammi didn't have the patience to go through with this ritual! One even had to take permission from the guru to listen to other artists in those days. If the teacher forbade you from listening to another artist, that was the last word, there was no room for discussion here!

This was an old custom, preserved by some *ustads* and khan sahebs even today. Even after marriage I would always take Ammi's permission before accepting any programmes or music conferences. She would always ask me to charge the right amount of fees, and ensure nobody would dupe me as a young artist.

This sacred ritual should have been reason enough for this other student of Ammi's and me to be close, but unfortunately, this was not so. There were terrible misunderstandings and misrepresentations that ensured that we did not forgive each other for a long time. A lot of this had to do with Ammi's gullible nature. She would willingly believe anything anybody told her. She also enjoyed pitting each of her students against the other. She quite enjoyed our inner tussles and rivalries in order to get her attention. She had the final laugh at our expense when she died so many miles away from all of us.

Though Anjali came to learn from Ammi sometime in 1954, Ammi soon grew quite fond of her. She had a voice that was rich and full of quivers and movements. And these quivers were essential embellishments in the *thumri* style of singing. She was extremely gifted and very quick on the uptake. On the other hand I had a flatish voice. So it would make me extremely jealous that while Anjali could repeat the movements that Ammi would indicate with such ease, I would practice for days to achieve the same kind of results. It would hurt me when Ammi praised her. Even today I respect and acknowledge the fact that Anjali has a gifted voice.

Fortunately for me, Anjali got married early and shifted out of Lucknow to be with her husband. So it wasn't until much later that she reestablished contact with Ammi again.

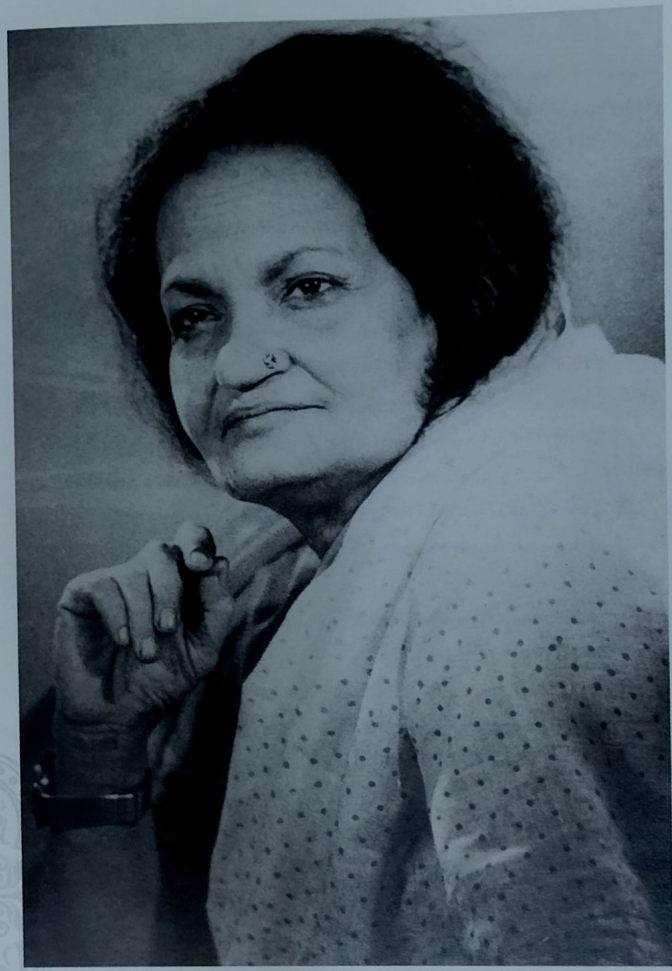
But there were others who came after that. And each of them occupied Ammi's affections for a while. Initially I would feel hurt when she snubbed me. After a while I

got used to it. Some students stayed for a couple of months and exploited Ammi to the extent of actually stealing her jewellery and other personal effects. She had the habit of lending jewellery generously for wearing during concerts and festivals. Most of us would honestly return these once the functions were over, as it should be. But some did not, leading to misunderstandings between them and Ammi. There were still others who squarely accused Ammi of poisoning them to create a scandal. Then there were others who just picked up her repertoire through her recordings and made tall claims of having been her students. I see through these frauds but what can I do? Who will listen to me? It is true that once I moved out of Lucknow after my marriage, our equations changed subtly, and obviously others who were waiting in line to grab an opportunity took full advantage of my exit.

Invariably she would tire of these sycophants and we would re-establish contact. Invariably, Ammi would tell me of somebody or the other's betrayal. It would pain me to listen to her, but I would remind her that it was partly her fault for trusting these people so blindly. She would sigh and say, "What could I do Shanto *bitiya*? She seemed like such a good friend."

Every time she would say that I would feel an intense stab of jealousy within me. I wanted to be her closest confidante. I wanted her to love only me. I wanted her to recognize the fact that the love and reverence I had for her, nobody else did. But it was not to be. With every new face the pain I felt diminished, and in a while I started feeling sorry for her when someone duped her again.

There was a time when one of her students filled her with such poison against me that she stopped communicating with me altogether. It was a period of intense trial for me. In fact I would keep up my earlier respectfulness, but she had completely changed. She stopped staying with me in Delhi. She wouldn't tell me about her



programmes in other cities. She would deliberately ask me not to sing with her when I accompanied her on stage in Delhi. When I visited her at the Nirula's Hotel in Delhi during her concert tours, she would talk to me perfunctorily, looking me up and down, "*Accha*, you are here." She then proceeded to completely ignore my presence.

I remember it was an Indonesian lady, Laila, who informed Abbu about these things. He took Ammi to task and apparently told her, "Why are you doing this to Shanto? Don't you know her well enough? She is like our daughter. You have no right to treat her so shabbily! Make up with her right away!"

This happened during the time I had returned to Lucknow for Bunting's wedding. I had been working in the kitchen like a family member, while some of her other students just came and preened around like prima donnas. Chhuttan Bhaiyya, who had always been my well-wisher, also told Ammi to reconsider her relationship with me. According to him I was as good as gold.

Soon after that she was in Delhi for a concert. When I heard she was here, as usual I just left everything, my home, my little son, and ran to be at her side. I wonder if Ammi were still amongst us, would I have the energy to run around like I used to? And when even an iota of doubt creeps in, I tell myself I would have been a different person had she been here today.

Anyway, when I reached the Marina hotel where she was staying on that trip, I realized she was running a high temperature. She asked me to leave once it got dark. But I had no intention of leaving her all alone in that condition. So I stayed back with her that night. I kept giving her cold compresses and pressing her feet.

Suddenly in the middle of the night she asked me, "*Bitiya*, why didn't you ask me why I was angry with you?"

I told her, "I knew that there was no point in doing so. Would you have believed me if I had offered any excuses."

Then she said, "But you just silently suffered my injustices? Why?"

"I knew you loved me, and that one day you would have it in your heart to forgive me for any sins of omission or commission." I said to her confidently.

"But five years have passed, *Bitiya*. When were you going to ask me?"

" Ok, I am asking you right now. Why were you so angry with me?" I said assertively.

She looked at me straight in the eye and said, "Somebody told me that your husband was spreading stories to the effect, 'Who is Begum Akhtar, my wife can sing better than her.' This truly upset me."

I asked her, "How could you believe Jagan or I could say such things? Couldn't you have at least given me the benefit of the doubt and asked me once?"

"I didn't want to believe it. But it hurt me so much! I didn't know what else to do." She said.

Then I told her, " The same person who has filled you against me, also told me things which I never even deigned to believe."

"What did they tell you?"

"Let it be." I pacified her. I told her that my mother and husband had asked me to completely ignore these things.

"No. You must tell me what they said to you?" She asked me.

When she forced me, I had to tell her, "I was told that you had predicted that I would never be able to perform. That my husband's position was no guarantee to my success!"

"Did they say that to you? Would I ever say such things for you?" Ammi was horrified.

"I never believed a word they said, but you didn't trust me enough or believe in me. That has hurt me more than anything else!" I told her frankly.

There were other incidents when she had suspected my husband, Jagannath P.

Chawla's (Jagan) intentions. We discussed these and other incidents threadbare that night. Apparently she had taken umbrage to the fact that Jagan had not given her the message when Begum Pataudi (Biya) had called for her at our place. This had happened some years back when she was staying with us while returning from one of her tours. She had been resting and Jagan had discreetly decided not to disturb her. She felt he was jealous of her high-level contacts and had tried to put a spoke in their friendship!

There was also the case of a drunken officer from the radio station, who would often call her at her hotel room and crudely ask to speak to her, claiming they were more than "good friends". Anyway this officer's cousin, who claimed to be a businessman from Ethiopia, wanted to get really close to Ammi for his own selfish reasons. He would decorate her hotel room with flowers before her arrival in Delhi. He would behave like an obsessive lover. Once he even threatened to kill himself if Ammi didn't respond to his affections. Ammi had him thrown out of her room in my presence. She had then asked Jagan to find out a little bit about his past. And when Jagan got back with details of what a fraud this man was, it was like telling Ammi that her judgement was poor. She didn't like that either. (It is a different matter that this man subsequently stole a lot of her recordings and sold them to All India Radio at a neat profit!) But she didn't like to feel belittled.

I spent that night convincing Ammi that Jagan and I hadn't ever meant to harm her. We ironed out every sore point, until every issue was resolved. I convinced her that I had only married this man after her approval. And both Jagan and I were aware that she was the one who had brought us together. And we were grateful to her for that. So why should we wish her ill? After that she was convinced and made up for all those years that we had been estranged by never doing anything without consulting

me. She would insist that only I accompany her for concerts. She would stay with me and we became close like before!

Arvind Bhai, her closest friend in Bombay, told me later that when he met Ammi three days before her death she regretted the fact that she had not recognized my worth earlier. That apparently Ammi said to him, "That Shanto was one person who never made any demands from me, neither in my music nor for my attention. I feel she has not been adequately compensated. May Allah give her a lot. She will be the one who will go far in life. These are my blessings for her. She was my true *shagird*, and I didn't recognize it at that time."

In fact just before she died in Ahmedabad, some journalist asked her, what would happen to her fans after her death. And she is supposed to have said, "If you want to listen to me after I am gone, listen to my student Shanti."

This was what the papers reported soon after she died. It caused such a furore. Her other students claimed that I had orchestrated the press reports. Why would I have done that?

There are so many things I admired about Ammi. In her presence I felt nothing but admiration for the way she conducted herself, to the extent that I was actually blind to her weaknesses. But with the distance of more than a quarter of a century without her, I am able to discern that she was really *kaan ki kacchi*. Anybody could fill her with lies and she would readily accept it. She was overawed by people from the "so-called" high society and she would fall for their flattery. To an extent she even encouraged sycophants. She also loved to create a drama around average events to pointlessly drag some silly thing out of proportion.

There were times when she would make someone feel so special that they would be up being on a pedestal. The moment the shine wore off, she would dump them so

hard that they wouldn't know if they were coming or going. There were only a few of us *Dhheett*, who were thick-skinned enough to weather her moods.

I saw so many people come and go. There were some students she would avoid by not taking their class for days, feigning a stomachache or something. Sometimes she would just sleep late while they would wait for her, unaware of her sinister plans. This would go on until they would lose heart and stop coming, then she would impishly announce, "Good riddance!" It didn't make sense, and I am sure some of these students must have been completely innocent, but for some reason she took a dislike to them.

When I think of her in the context of the institutionalized world of music today, I don't think she would have been able to function at all. She would have been too restless to move on. She wouldn't have been able to stick to the rules and regulations for even a day!

Nobody understands how important her affections were to me in those days. Nobody understands how important she is to me even today. In fact in a recurring dream I had immediately after her death, I would see her breeze into my room in the early hours of the dawn. In that secret hour between night and day, she would cup my face in her palms and blow into my face, "haah", and I would say to her, "Ammi, but I thought you were dead!" She would look at me somewhat surprised, "Who told you that I am no more?" I would then be blinded for a moment, and she would say, "Now you wait and see what happens!" and disappear altogether. I take it as a sign of her blessing me.

In fact after her death I found it difficult to even bring myself to sing again, until Sheila Dhar told me that it was imperative that I carry forward her legacy. When I started my regular *riyaaz*, I would sometimes feel the door of my music room burst open, as if Ammi had just walked in unexpectedly. It was very strange.

Once when I went to Pakistan for a concert in 1981, on a joint invitation from the Pakistani Government and the ICCR, I distinctly felt her presence on stage, as if she had come there especially to give me the courage to go on!

وہ اسیرِ دامِ بلا ہم میں.....

Wo aseer-e-daam-e-bala hum main...
I am (such a) prisoner of the trap of adversity...

GOD

My children sometimes don't realize how Ammi influenced my life right from the time I must have been twenty until now. There are so many stories and little incidents that inextricably link her to my life that not a moment passes when I don't think of her. She is my meditation, my salvation. What was my life like before I met her? It seems to me as if the Shanti who didn't know Ammi was someone else.

I was born in Lucknow on the 29 October 1933. At least that is what my passport says. My father, Hiranand Mansukhani, and my mother Gyani, who was also called Sita Bhabhi after marriage, hailed from Sindh, Hyderabad. My father shifted to Lucknow in the mid-1920s to assist his brother-in-law, in his silk business. His sister was much older than him and he really looked up to her. Since he lost his father at a young age, he also gave his brother-in-law the respect due to one's own father. When his sister suggested he come to Lucknow to help her husband, he couldn't refuse.

Both my elder sisters were born in Sindh, but I was fortunate enough to be born in the cultured environs of Lucknow. For generations, Lucknow has been the undisputed cultural capital of northern India. Whereas Bombay and Calcutta

developed as energetic and bustling industrial hubs and Delhi was the centre of politics, it was the twin-cities of Lucknow and Faizabad, steeped as they were in the particular cultural traditions of Awadh, which provided an ideal environment for an artist to grow. Right from the development of Urdu as a language, its Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb* and the "*pehle aap*" culture, the development of dance and music here into veritable fine arts, the origins of instruments like the tabla and the sitar, birth of Urdu theatre, which led to the development of the Parsi theatre, which ultimately formed the basic structure of the Hindi films, can all be traced to Lucknow.

My eldest sister was around five years older and the younger one was three-and-a-half years my senior. In fact when we were young we would proudly step out together as the Mansukhani sisters.

Since I was the third daughter, I think my mother was quite disappointed at my birth. She must have wanted a son, which was natural to expect and my arrival must have put paid to all her hopes and aspirations. Those were trying times for her and she was virtually reduced to being a glorified maid servant in my aunt's house. Having produced one more girl, she must have had to hear no end. She never said anything, but I just felt this in her general attitude towards me when I was younger. She would subtly ignore me by pretending to be deeply immersed in the housework. I don't say this bitterly, but more to understand how things were in those days. As a result of her general disregard, I just grew wild, and extremely tomboyish and developed a mind of my own.

I would roam freely in the neighbourhood, happily eating what different people offered me, with supreme nonchalance. I guess I wanted to portray a kind of swaggering attitude more prevalent among boys in those days. I would deliberately not get involved in household chores, be scruffily dressed, climb trees and generally

try and be the boy that my mother always longed for and never had. Perhaps this is one of the reasons I kept my father's name, Hiranand, as a part of my name. Unconsciously, I wanted to somehow carry on his name. This was as much a tribute to my mild-mannered, soft-spoken father, as also to make my mother feel that she had eventually given him an heir. It also goes to my husband's credit that he never objected to this wish of mine.

During those years my father would often travel to Nainital on business. On one such trip my uncle allowed him to take my mother with him too. Here my mother ran into an old school friend of hers from Sindh, Mrs. Pahunchi Advani. She was a frail woman undergoing treatment for tubercolosis at that time. Her husband, Dada Advani was in the clothing business in Lucknow. They became one of our closest family friends, especially after Pahunchi's death. Pahunchi had made my mother promise that she would look after her children in case something happened to her. I feel proud to say that despite our circumstances, this was one role that my mother always took very seriously. Dada Advani on his part would make it a point to have lunch with us every Sunday throughout the years we were in Lucknow. Their children Mohini, Ram, Arjun, Kishan and Lila were like our own blood brothers and sisters. I am still in touch with them and whenever I travel to Lucknow, I still stay with their daughter, Mohini Manglik. Staying at her place makes me feel like I'm back home again.

When I was young, nobody particularly noticed that I could sing. First of all we were part of this huge joint family, and secondly we were a trading family. Such finer arts as singing were just not appreciated. Then we mustn't forget that my parents were not even living in their own home, but that they were second-class citizens in the home of my father's elder sister. So who would notice the talents of a young toddler in such circumstances?

But I remember I had an old maid, who loved me a lot. I used to call her Ammaji.

She would come to my rescue when the alarm bells would ring in the house that I had disappeared. I would invariably be rescued chomping *mathris* and *achar* or *pakodas*. Ammaji would quickly come and get me and make up some excuse at home to save my skin. I also spent a lot of time at her quarters. She used to entertain a lot of people from her village while I would be playing there. She treated Muslims and Hindus alike. Everyone was her brother. And this habit got inculcated into me, to treat everyone as an equal, never to discriminate on the basis of religion and respect everyone's individual faith. This respect for religion is a special quality that one imbibes while growing up in Lucknow. Instances abound of Muslim rulers maintaining places of worship for their Hindu subjects. It is said that at some of these temples, the evening *aarti* wouldn't commence before their Muslim ruler arrived.

Over the generations, Lucknow has managed to unite people from as diverse backgrounds as western Asia and the rustic folk from the Gangetic plain, merging myth, mythology and religion and synthesizing it into an intoxicatingly composite culture. As a young girl I have myself witnessed Hindu families offering water to Muslims during the *tazia* procession on Moharram in Lucknow. The entire city would be out on the streets as the *tazia* approached a particular locality. Hindus and Muslims would treat the procession as auspicious, and wish for some unfulfilled dream to come true as the *tazia* passed before them. The kind of *matamkhani*, or mourning, that I have witnessed in Lucknow during Moharram, I doubt if it exists anywhere else in India.

There was an *amrud* seller, Nabi, who was a regular visitor at Ammaji's house. He cared a lot for me and would always save some fruit for me. And whenever I went to play there, he would hand it over to me with a flourish saying, "This is for my *bitiya*!" He would also take me for all the fairs in town. I would sit on his shoulders and go happily to all the toy fairs in town. He would buy me cheap terracotta utensils and dolls. This would thrill me no end. In a house where no one had the time to spoil me, these little things meant a lot.

Often when Ammaji went shopping, she would carry me with her. The shopkeepers would indulge me by asking me if I wanted anything special. They would offer me sweets and toffees. I would invariably want something inconsequential like a slice of coconut or something. These shopkeepers would then tell me to sing a song for them and in return they would give me the sweets free of cost! So I would stand in the middle of the market square and belt out some popular number. And end up getting a huge applause. Not to mention, a day's supply of sweets. This must have been in the late thirties. Nobody used to think of teaching children how to sing in those days, especially a girl child.

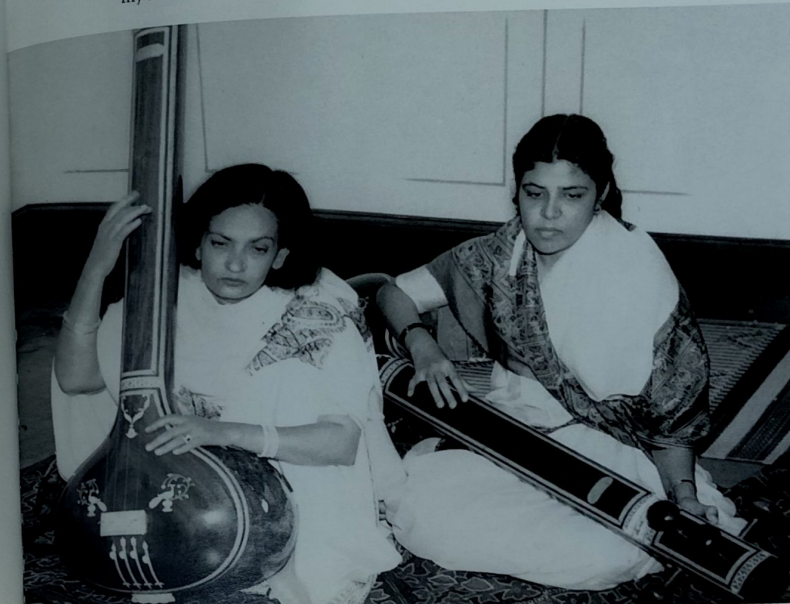
Now, my parents had a number of friends who used to drop by every evening. There were professors from the university, freedom fighters and doctors. They would often ask me to sing something while we all sat on the terrace, enjoying the cool evening breeze. It was our family physician, Dr. S.K. Bose, who finally said to my father, "Hirabhai, this girl is talented. Why don't you put her in a music school?"

My father, as I was saying, was an annoyingly quiet man. In fact our main channel of communication was our mother. When I think back now, I realize how difficult life must have been for her. To accompany her husband to a totally new place, living under her tyrant-like sister-in-law's iron rule. She would untiringly do the entire housework. She would cook the food, wash dishes when required, take care of the laundry, sew and mend the clothes, iron—it used to seem as if her work was never done. Yet she did all this cheerfully. Never once did I hear her complain to my father. How could the two of them possibly think of putting me in a music school? My father in fact had no idea if there were any schools that gave training in music, so he asked Dr. Bose in a surprised sort of way if there was in fact any place he could send me to learn music.

Dr. Bose promptly suggested, "Why don't you put her in the Music College?"

So at his instance I was admitted to the Music College run by Ratanjankarji, a pupil of the great Bhatkhande. (Pandit Srikrishna Narayan Ratanjankar is one of the most important musicologists and composers of the last century. His simplicity and dedication to the cause of classical music are legendary. Ratanjankar was born into a middle-class Maharastrian family in Bombay on 31 December 1900. He first trained under Pandit Krishnam Bhat of Karwar and then under Pandit Anant Manohar Joshi. Later, he trained under Pandit Bhatkhande and this shaped his life for the next sixty years. In 1917, Ratanjankar got a scholarship for studying music in Baroda and came under the influence of Ustad Faiyaz Khan, of the Agra Gharana. He studied under him for five years, before moving back to Bombay. Ratanjankar started his teaching career in Bhatkhande's Sharada Sangeet Mandal and then moved to Bhatkhande's Music College in Lucknow. He soon became its principal and served in that capacity for 35 years (1926-1957, 1966-1970). In spite of being a master vocalist, he decided to dedicate himself to the propagation of classical music.)

So my cousin Kamala and I were formally admitted to the Music College at Lucknow. She was a couple of years older than me. We used to have a servant, Jagannath, who would take us there balancing both of us on the cycle bar. And while Kamala was learning dance, I was enrolled in a class for classical music. I remember watching a number of artists come and go as I waited outside my cousins' class, for invariably I would be let off earlier than her. These people left an early impression on my mind. I may not have known then who these artists were, I was only six or seven



at that time, but in hindsight it was truly an eclectic campus for a young person to train in music.

Years later, when I came back to this college as a teenager, I distinctly remember having listened to both Ratanjankarji and Natu saheb. Ratanjankarji was a petite man, wearing his signature *kurta, pyjama* and waistcoat, with a permanent *paan* stain on the side of his mouth. V.G. Jog, the famous violinist, used to be there. He would come on his cycle every evening. Bodas Masterji, Veena Sahasrabuddhe's father, would visit the campus. Dinkar Kaikini was also learning there in those days. He would still remember me from all those years ago, as if it were just yesterday.

We used to live at Hazratganj at that time. My aunt had these huge apartments over Whiteways, an English outfitter. The apartments were full of terraces and large hall-type rooms, where we were all easily accomodated. Soon after I joined the Music School, I remember we moved into our own home at Lalbaug. In 1942, my father shifted to Lahore, to take care of the family business there. It was at my uncle's instance that we had to shift. It seemed as if my father had no say in the matter. People have often said that my father was a weak and submissive man. They allege that we had to live out the consequences of his being too mild-mannered, not being assertive enough. But I appreciated him because I knew he had a natural tendency to not get into a fight. He just wanted to peacefully co-exist with everyone, without causing any controversy. And above all he was a quiet and caring man. I see a lot of my father's nature reflected in my own nature, so I have always respected him.

My grandmother had sold off my father's entire share of land and property in Sindh and invested it in my uncle's business. But father was always treated like an employee. I remember that my uncle and cousins used to come back from the shop in a car, whereas my father would walk back. But that was the way he was.

We moved into an apartment in Nicholson Road in Lahore. This was an old *mohalla* of Lahore. Just behind Nicholson Road was the Qila Gujjar Singh, where Mallika Pukhraj used to live. It was not exactly downtown Lahore, for that would have been the Anarkali area, but it was home. And it was very close to the railway station.

There used to be a blind lady who used to teach music at the Dayal Singh College campus, by the name of Indira Kohli. The campus was right behind our house. I used to attend Kinnead School by day and attend Indira Kohli's music classes in the evening. She taught me some *ragas* and *bandishes*, most of which I recall even today. I have seen Pandit Amarnath as a young man in her house. I am not sure if he came there to learn from her, but he was a family friend of hers, and years later when I was attached to the Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, I renewed contacts with him, and he recalled me from all those years ago.

Once I became Indiraji's student I was totally attached and accompanied her on all her programmes on the radio as well as for concerts. I would not only accompany her on the *tanpura* but also generally assist her at the venues. And she for her part gave me the skills to perform on stage for the first time in my life. I remember singing *raag Bahar* at the Dayal Singh Boys' College; I was so nervous that first time, but she quietly instilled strength in me.

After that I had the confidence to audition at the Radio Lahore. It was nothing very formal in those days. Somebody put in a word of recommendation at the radio station, and the rest was taken care of. This was actually my first foray into the world of music. I got paid fifteen rupees for my first recording. Since dates would be announced in advance, my entire clan in Sindh and extended family in Lucknow would tune in to listen. Singing live on the Radio is still a very special experience for me. And even today, artists get their credibility by their performances on Radio. It is also important to be a radio artist because the grades that they assign become like a kind of hallmark. It was at the radio station at Lahore that I registered my full name as Shanti Hiranand. And that name has remained since.

By this time my sisters had graduated from school and enrolled at Isabella Thobrun College in Lucknow. I was in my last year at school and was

with my parents in Lahore. This was in early 1947. I remember one of my broadcasts was scheduled sometime in March 1947. I even remember the *bandish* that I had been asked to prepare. But it was a tense time, and riots had broken out in Lahore; curfew had been imposed. My mother refused to let me go to the radio station. But my father insisted that I should go. His logic was that since the entire family listened to me perform, they would feel reassured that we were alive when I went on air. And so he took it upon himself to ensure that I went on to record and broadcast that day.

We borrowed somebody's car and drove to the radio station. When we reached there, there was no instrumentalist on duty that day. Everyone had decided to stay away considering the riot alert. There was a gentleman, Mr. Mathur, who was the Duty Officer. He later got transferred to Delhi and I met him years later when he was a programme executive at A.I.R. in Delhi. He used to play the *tabla* as a hobby in those days and offered to accompany me that day. So in this way we went ahead with the broadcast, with Mr. Mathur on the *tabla* and me on the *tanpura*. My relatives, especially my *nani*'s side of

the family, heard the programme and told us later that my singing really gave them hope, because there was no other means of communication. There were no telephones and the postal service too was disrupted.

After this riots broke out in full force. Slowly people began to flee Lahore. We stayed on until things were really out of control.

We were four families of really close friends in one building in Lahore. At that time it was still undecided whether Lahore would be given away to West Pakistan or whether Calcutta would be given to East Pakistan instead. Lahore had a number of Hindu families and we were sure that it would remain with India. Once the decision came through, naturally, the British Pathan Regiment left Lahore and as there were no security nets in place, there was utter mayhem in the city. The railway stations were scenes of mass carnage, which are now legendary. So there was no question of taking a train in those days. The two families who left by train later told us that there was continuous crossfire until they reached the border at Sindh. So they would just lie low in a bid to survive.

One of our relatives Mr. Khubchand, Dada Advani's brother-in-law, had a huge bookstore in the Mall by the name Ray and Sons. It was a well-stocked bookshop. Since some Britishers were still living in this area, it was also an extremely popular shop in those days. They used to live in an apartment just above the bookshop. He was a fellow Sindhi, although his wife hailed from Punjab. They were godsend for us. A few days before we left Lahore, we were forced to shift into their place.

I'll never forget the day we actually left our house. It is a memory that will haunt me forever. As I mentioned earlier, we used to live in a congested part of the town. We had a number of Muslim neighbours. A Maulvi saheb had befriended my father and he had offered us complete protection. He told us not to fear at all, that no harm would ever come to us and we trusted him completely. He had assured us that in case he felt that the situation was getting worse he would tell us to move otherwise we

were quite safe in the area. On the night of 13 August he finally came to my father and said hopelessly, "Hiranand Bhai, now you must leave. The mob has taken over this area, you are no longer safe."

My father called up a friend of his who was in the fire department. He sent us a truck to escape in. When the truck arrived, the driver claimed he had already witnessed some stabbings on the way. He asked my father to hurry up and call everyone who was home.

My father had thought that he would make two trips, one to drop off the stuff and then come back to get us, my mother and me. The driver was convinced that if we stayed back even for a while, we would be lynched by the mob.

I'll never forget that I had just got some new instruments from Rikhiram and Sons in Lahore, a brand new *tanpura*, harmonium and set of *tabla*. It broke my heart to have to leave them behind. Somehow no other instrument I have bought since can quite make up for their loss. We quickly packed some clothes and money in a handbag and made a dash for it. Once inside the truck, the driver, who was a kindly Muslim gentleman, asked my mother and me to lie prostrate on the floor of the vehicle. He said the mob shouldn't see us women or else…

I must have been fourteen or fifteen at that time. I remember in the first flush of youth I had even enjoyed young men hooting and whistling at me on the streets, but I was afraid now. There was this particularly despicable character who ran a shop at the street corner. He used to always make rude gestures at me and I despised him. He was standing outside his shop as we passed by. I grew really scared. He called out to my father, "Hiranandji, are you fleeing? I am standing here. I will make sure that no one troubles you. They will have to cross my dead body first!"

I was shocked. A man I had always thought of as despicable was willing to give his life for us! Early morning on 14 August 1947 we shifted to the Mall Road flat of our relative.

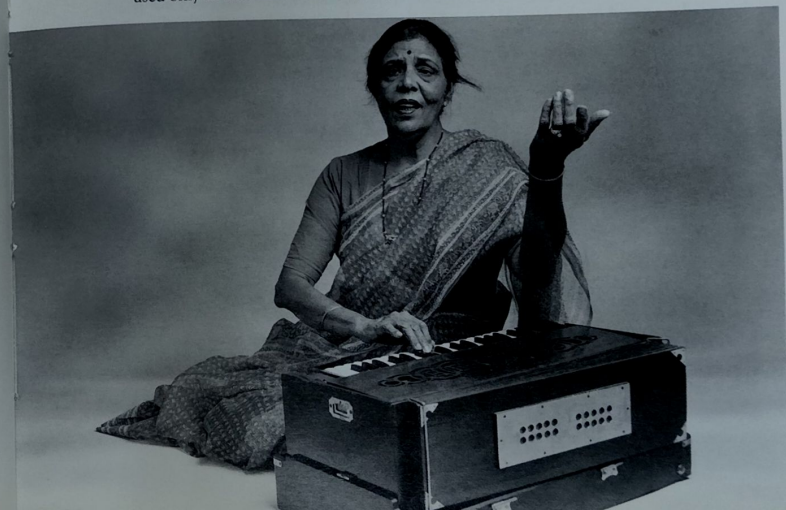
I will never forget the screaming and the burning and the killing on the way to Mall Road. Houses were burned down with their occupants still trapped inside. It is what Gujarat witnessed after the Godhra incident. When will we learn, when will we resolve this pain, that started all those years ago? I remained a mute witness then, I remain a quiet one even now.

I remember for months during the riots, before the final partition, all of us neighbours used to get together to guard our terraces in Nicholson Road by keeping chilly powder, acid and boiling hot water at hand, in case anybody should try and make a forced entry! I went back to our house in Nicholson road a few days after we shifted to Mall Road. It was completely charred. The mob must have come as soon as we left. They had obviously looted the house first and then set fire to what remained of it. I have persisting visions of drooping ceiling fan blades, from my visit that day. They must have melted in the blaze!

We finally took a flight on 21 August 1947 to Delhi from Lahore. There used to be these little Dakota planes in those days. It was the first time I had ever flown. When we arrived in Delhi, we were put up at Scindia House. There used to be a gentleman by the name of Tolaram Gidwani who took us in temporarily. The situation was so bad that we had to grind our own cereals, and eat whatever we could forage. Connaught place was a scene of mass looting and rioting. All the fancy stores were lying open. There seemed to be a state of total anarchy. Shoes and high fashion wear were strewn all over the streets. I heard that in Paharganj cars had to sometimes drive over dead bodies, in a bid to avoid getting caught in a riot, it was so bad. I never really saw this myself, but these were the stories that went around in those days.

We ultimately took a flight to Lucknow a week later. Reaching Lucknow was like a homecoming. This time we moved into Joplin Road. There was a huge house here that had been used as a godown earlier. We got it repaired and shifted in. My sisters moved in home from their rooms in the hostel. So we were all together at last. My eldest sister, Padma, was teaching at a local school. The second one, Parvati, was still completing her final year in college. My father's sister had passed away in the interim period. But her sons and daughters-in-law lived very close to where we were. Although we didn't have much of an interaction now that the businesses were separated, but we still kept up relations. This was also mainly at my mother's behest. I remember I had once had a serious argument with my uncle and had sworn never to see his face again, but it was my mother who made me go back and apologize to him.

In those days I had made a promise to myself that I would never marry; that I would look after my parents for the rest of my life. I was quite an austere Gandhian in my own way. I used to only wear *khadi* and *chhint salwars*, even in Lahore. Besides I used only *lal imli* wool in the winters, as it was synonymous with the freedom



movement. I would sleep on the floor because I had heard that Gandhiji used to sleep on the floor. I would enthusiastically join rallies and *prabhat pheris*.

By some stroke of luck Mr. Awasthi from Lahore Radio Station got transferred to Lucknow in those days. We were family friends from Lahore. In fact I had even visited his mother and sister at their home, which was very close to where we lived on Nicholson Road. Since he knew me well and was extremely fond of me, in no time I started getting radio programmes in Lucknow too. So in a sense my singing career didn't suffer at all. I would regularly be sent compositions that had to be sung on the radio and with the help of local artists I would have them set to music and perform them live on radio. Besides, I would also get small concert invitations at Barabanki and Sultanpur, all thanks to Mr. Awasthi. I would promptly give all the money I earned from these programmes to my mother. Besides this my father resumed work at the shop. And this is how we ran our expenses. There was never too much; but never too little either. And I liked it that way.

After moving to Lucknow, I started training under Puroshotam Das Jalota, father of the popular artist Anoop Jalota. He stayed in the same locality and for a couple of years I trained under him. Their family had moved to Lucknow after the partition, via Jullandher. I still remember their house. It was a typical Punjabi household, with a *Biji*, an elderly woman who was the head of the family. Anoop would probably not recall me, as he was just a little baby then.

By now I was at Isabella Thorbun College. The principal had taken me on despite the fact that my results had not yet been declared due to the disturbances. In the meantime I also joined a chorus group. Choral singing was very popular at that time. I still remember my friends from the group, Anita Talwar, Sujata Chakravarti, Sahana Chatterjee, Mujjadad Niazi, Afzal Hussain and others. We would have quite a good time at the recordings. Sometimes we would still be recording at midnight. Recordings were nearly always live. A number of girls would be flirting outright with some of the programme executives and producers. We'd be sipping tea and munching *samosas* with the entire radio station staff. It would have been quite scandalous for the times, except for the fact that we were quite innocent and nothing wrong ever transpired. We would also do small radio plays and dramas as well.

There used to be those huge spool-type tape recorders, and it would be very difficult to rewind and retape on them. So very often we would gloss over our mistakes by making up dialogues on the spot. We would do special programmes for 15 August and 26 January. As a result of which I would be at the Radio Station every second day. It became a second home for me!

It was amazing that my parents never said a word or stopped me from pursuing my interests. In fact my sisters would bring their friends home, and we would often go for picnics in a mixed group, go for movies with young men, but my parents never objected. They had implicit trust in us and we never betrayed that trust.

My main inspiration in those days was the continuous flow of radio programmes. It was really that which made me keep my music alive and strive to improve continuously. In a bid to improve my voice I started voice training under a *sarangi nawaz*. But soon my mother didn't like this man's leering face. So he was ordered to stop coming. And in his place his uncle, Ustad Aijaz Hussain Khan of Rampur, started teaching me *khayal* gayaki (style of singing). He was an extremely old and impressive teacher. I didn't realize it then, but in later years I have been told how well-known he was. So I feel truly honoured to have had him as my *ustad*. He was an extremely disciplined man. I remember, he used to walk all the way to my house to teach me. And he introduced me to the structured world of the *bada khayal* and gave me important lessons in *badhat*, or how to improvise. His training gave me a far greater repertoire to perform on the radio, and then Ammi happened to me. It was as if my entire life had just been in preparation of meeting her.

As I mentioned earlier, it was Mr. Awasthi who was responsible for introducing me to Ammi. Learning from Ammi gave me that particular sheen, which none of the other girls whom I used to sing with in the chorus could ever achieve. While they continued at the same level, I gradually started singing *thumris* and *dadras* on radio. Slowly my grades as an artist also improved. I started travelling with Ammi. People all over the country noticed my singing and for a while I quite enjoyed basking in her reflected glory. I would go to the extent of saying that even now I am nothing but a reflection of that great soul.

The kind of consciousness there is regarding classical music these days, was unthinkable in my time. First of all this art form was restricted to a very small group of performers and people from outside the field had little or no access to high-class venues in which to enjoy this music, especially in North India. In Delhi, the only music festival where you could listen to all the famous artists of the day was the Shankarlal Music Festival. This used to be held on the lawns of the Constitution Club in those days. This was one of the few occasions when ordinary citizens could indulge in classical music and come away drenched in *swaras*.

When the ITC Sangeet Sammelan began, it was another opportunity for music lovers to rejoice. Ammi would regularly perform at these conferences, and I would often accompany her. I remember on one occasion after the Shankarlal Music Festival, some newspaper columnist commented that Begum Akhtar's student had a golden voice! Me? With a golden voice? Ammi was thrilled when she heard this. She was very proud and went around telling everyone about it. I remember feeling completely worthless compared to Ammi and thinking how dare the columnist write these things about me! To tell the truth, it is only now that I have understood what constitutes a good performance.

I remember after this Ammi was keen that I make the grade as a radio artist in the *thumri* category. But unfortunately I wasn't selected.

Acharya Brihaspatiji used to be the chief producer at AIR Delhi in those days. In the normal circumstances, Ammi would have gone straight to the Director General AIR and given him a piece of her mind, simply instructing him to give me a good grade since I was already performing with her, and newspapers were writing about my performances. She never had any qualms about hauling up people in the Radio, no matter how senior they were. By then she was aware of the position she enjoyed in the music world and she could easily throw a tantrum and get what she wanted. Besides with the media attention on me in those days it would have been very easy to convince anyone that I was ready as an artist.

But she knew that strategy wouldn't work with Acharyaji. So Ammi decided to adopt a novel way to discuss this matter with him. She was charm personified when she said to him, "Acharyaji, you are such a scholar, if you say she isn't ready, you must be right! We *tawaif* artists hardly know anything about classical music. You are such a great artist. We are mere upstarts in comparison to you!"

Brihaspatiji began to get embarrassed, "No, no…that is not true!"

"Yes, of course, it is true!" said Ammi. "It is just by the grace of Allah that I am where I am, otherwise I am worth nothing."

Now, Brihaspatiji was a highly respected producer on Radio in those days. He was also an acknowledged classical scholar in his own right. He was very well informed about music, but also a trifle pompous and held the female professional singers in low esteem so much so that he once refused to sit in the same car with Siddheswari Devi.

Ammi told me of this incident while recalling her conversation with Brihaspathiji to make him give me my grade. While talking to him and praising him, she also asked him to perform along with her on the stage and to let the public decide who was the better artist.

Ammi reasoned with him, "I think that if this girl can't even make the grade as a Radio artist in the *thumri* category, she should not be allowed to accompany me on the National Programme!"

He started humming and hawing, "So what if she hasn't been given a grade, this is just a formality. I will look into it."

Soon after that I got another invitation to audition. I recorded a *thumri* for the panel to take the decision. I was surprised when Pandit Jasraj, who was on the panel, called me himself. He congratulated me on having made it, "Bhai, you sang so well that I have given you a straight A grade. If the choice were in my hands I would have given you an even higher grade!"

Soon after that Hafiz Khan called me, "You have made it to an A grade, congratulations!" Hafiz Khan was from Kanpur. He was Nissar Khan's son-in-law and always spoke with great affection for Ammi whenever he met me. He rose to quite a high rank on the Radio and even went on to become the Vice-Chancellor of Khairagarh University of Music, in Madhya Pradesh.

I was really proud that day. I had been declared a top-grade artist! (From being declared a failure just a little while before!) I realize now that it was nothing but Ammi's glory that shone on me.

I remember the Programme Executives or Pecs as they were called in those days would receive her at the gate. Duty officers would flurry around her, organizing tea and cigarettes for her. In fact I still remember Salamat Bhai, who used to be a programme executive with AIR Delhi in those days. He was extremely fond of Ammi, and whenever she was in town he would be by her side. During recordings, he would

be at her beck and call. I remember he would only go home after ensuring that she had been safely dropped back at the hotel. Often he would bring her *besan ki roti* and *mirch ka achar* during her recordings. Ammi would make sure that even if other food had been ordered for her, she would eat only his rotis. Though we knew that Salamat Bhai lived with his family in Daryaganj, we never had an opportunity to meet them. Even after Ammi's death, Salamat Bhai would take care of me like a little child, whenever I visited the Radio station.

Very often the Director General would come down and accompany her to the studio for her recording. Many times they would even sit through the recording, in deference to her.

She on her part would strike a close rapport with everyone, starting with the station director right down to the clerks. She would ask them about their families and chat familiarly. Most of the staff at the radio station in those days was connected with music in some way or the other. Even the chowkidar had a good idea of classical music and the hierarchy of luminaries in the field of music.

When we went out of station, the Director would very often receive us and chaperone us through the trip. He would also take the liberty to invite the music lovers in town for a private *baithak* at the Radio Station studio.

Nowadays, when I go for a recording at the radio station, the clerks on duty don't even recognize your presence. They roughly make you sign the register and coldly lead you to the designated studio. There is none of the respect and warmth of those days. Most of the staff is from the public service commission. They have nothing to do with music. They are only doing their job and can't wait to be promoted out of here. The other day I even heard an announcer on a late night programme say, "Now, listen to raag Bhairavi on the tabla!" I don't think it even occurred to the poor soul that it is impossible to play any *raag* on the *tabla*.

I don't claim to be a great artist, but this much I can say: I have truly touched the spiritual heights that music can transport the soul to. And for me this *anand*, whether it is derived from listening to others or in my own singing, is a reward in itself. Another thing that I have earned is the respect of most of the senior artists of the day. They recognize the fact that I have inherited and honestly nurtured a very particular style of singing, with very little institutional or media support. They agree that I have kept alive the *parampara* (tradition) of Begum Akhtar and that I have been true to her style.

Each and every moment that I have spent with Ammi is clear in my mind as if it happened only yesterday. I have only to close my eyes and the floodgates of my memory deluge me with thoughts of her. I remember the times when I would accompany her on stage. I wouldn't even realize then what I was singing. But at times she would compliment me by suddenly turning around and kissing me on the forehead to bless me. It would be such a humbling moment.

Once I petulantly said to her, "Ammi, I want to record something too!"

She immediately called up Dubeyji at HMV and set up a recording for me. Just like that. That morning she decided what I would sing, by the afternoon it was already in the groove. I remember I had sung the *ghazal*, *"Nazar nawaz nazaron main ji nahin lagta…"* in *Raag Bahar,* which became a huge hit. It was as simple as that!

Soon my sisters were married off. Padma, my eldest sister, got married into the Patiala family. Her husband was an Army officer, posted at Assam in those days. He met her through some common friends and they decided to tie the knot. My other sister was teaching English at a local school after passing her M.A. exams. Dr. Bose, my father's friend, arranged for her to marry the only son of the freedom fighter, Durga Devi Vora. Durga Bhabhi, as she used to be known then, had valiantly fought

alongside Bhagat Singh in her youth. Her son had just returned from the States and was considered the most eligible bachelor in town.

I must have been in my late twenties by then and I was still unmarried. I had no intention of getting married either. As I said earlier, I wanted to be with my parents to take care of them until they grew old and frail. I wanted to just be with them. Even my marriage, when it finally happened, was completely Ammi's decision. It was just a coincidence that my husband had heard me at a programme at Roorkee. He was very impressed. He had just returned to India at Jawaharlal Nehru's invitation. This must have been sometime in 1959. He was an Aeronautical Engineer, with a speciality in missile design. He had been a professor at UCLA, besides consulting for the US government on a project basis.

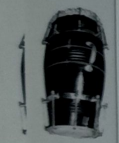
M.C. Chagla was the Indian Ambassador to the United States in those days. He was very impressed with Jagan (Jagannath P. Chawla), my husband. He put in a word to Nehru that it would be a matter of great pride for India to invite a scholar like him as an advisor for our defence programmes. Initially my husband was averse to the idea of leaving his faculty position, but when wooed right royally, he relented. I still have some of Nehru's warm letters to him, full of the idealism. He was immediately made a Director, Defence Production, on his arrival. Though years later, during the Indira Gandhi regime, Jagan grew extremely disillusioned with the system, as he could never kowtow to his political bosses. Eventually he resigned in a huff and remained bitter and frustrated till the end. In fact he even advised his friend, the Nobel Laureate Khurana, to never return to India. But in those early days idealism and patriotism ruled the hearts and minds of the young.

Now, my husband was a self-made man, who lived by his own convictions. He had made up his mind that he wanted a life-partner who was also a person of her own mind and talents. And he decided that he wanted to marry me. He took the initiative and wrote to my father, seeking my hand, as was the norm in those days. My parents were extremely excited. They let him know that we would be in Delhi on such and such date, hurriedly giving him my *nani's* address, lest he change his mind, slyly fixing up a rendezvous without my knowledge or consent.

This was in 1962 and I had just visited Pakistan with Ammi. We had stayed with Shama's brother in Rawalpindi. He was in the Pakistan Army and was the Mess incharge. We had received a tremendous response at our performances there which also had the then President of Pakistan in audience and I simply adored the adulation of the crowds. That was a time in my life when things were really taking off. And in terms of my career it was the worst time for me to think of settling down. I remember that Ammi had to stay back for a performance in Karachi, while I had to rush back to go to Shimla for a recording. So Ammi arranged for me to travel to Lahore and take the train to Delhi and then to Shimla for the recording.

By the time I returned to Delhi I had developed eye flu. When I was told that I would have to meet a prospective groom, I put my foot down and flatly refused. My *nani* suggested that I wear a pair of dark glasses and meet him without making any more fuss. And that was the end of the matter. I was seething inside, but I got ready nevertheless. I remember wearing an apple green chikan sari, with a white blouse and this big pair of owlish lenses. I had probably hoped to scare him off. But when I eventually met him, I must admit that I was instantly charmed. In fact so was my entire family. He did look terribly handsome in his dark Nehru jacket.

Without standing on too many ceremonies, Jagan asked my father if he could take me out for dinner the next day. Since we were both mature there was no question of my parents objecting. I protested lamely, saying that my eyes were all swollen and that I didn't want to go out looking like a mess. He wasn't one to take no for an answer.



He came to pick me up in his shining new Fiat the next day and we eventually ended up at the Ashoka's for dinner. I had never been to such a grand five-star hotel in my life. Besides, I was also nervous that I didn't have the necessary skills to eat with a fork and knife. I kept thinking what he would think of me if he were to see me fumbling with the cutlery! As soon as he asked me what I would like to eat, I quickly said, "Let's eat Indian food!"

After dinner we sat out on the terrace for a while. That was when he told me about having heard me at a concert in Roorkee. He then requested me to sing something for him. I remember I was quite taken up with him by this time. It was a bewitching moment. Spring was in the air and I felt my heart sommersault. I ended up admitting as much when I hummed, "*Aeso se laagi preet…*" for him, in Raag Chandrakauns.

Although I had made it pretty clear that any final decision on my marriage could only be taken once Ammi got back, I found myself awakening to his obvious charms. I must admit that I was flattered by his attention, in spite of myself. I wanted to get to know him better and so we decided to write to each other.

Now to tell the truth, Ammi had been after my case regarding marriage. She sincerely believed that a woman's true domain was her husband's home. She felt that marriage endowed women with respectability and a true sense of herself. But I never listened to her. I was keen to pursue a career with no strings attached. And I was lucky to have such liberated parents in those days.

When Ammi returned from Karachi, my mother promptly told her about Jagan. She was very excited and wanted to meet him as soon as possible. He used to visit Hindustan Aeronautics Limited in those days and would often come to Kanpur for board meetings. She took the opportunity to invite him to dinner at Havelock Road. And what a spread she laid out for him—a feast fit for a king. She cooked several delicacies herself. She made sure everything was just perfect for the occasion. She charmed him to the gills. He was no less.

For a start he was a handsome man. And he was used to moving in the company of poets and ballerinas and artists of all hues. He knew exactly what to say to put her at ease. She was terribly impressed. He was perfect according to her.

"Not only does he have a good job, he also has a strong personality. You need someone like him to look after you, otherwise these *sarangiwalas* and *tabalchis* will eat you alive. He is the man for you!" She had made the decision for me.

We were exchanging passionate letters by now. I would read these over and over again. Ammi used to be really curious to know what went on between us. She would often tease me and ask me to read out the letters to her.

I would fob her off by saying, "Ammi, they are in English! How will you understand it?"

She would smartly retort, "Aye, our Shama here can read English perfectly. She can read it out for all of us, and we too can enjoy your romance!" I would go red in the face with embarrassment. She would thoroughly enjoy making fun of me.

Suddenly, I started staying home more regularly. I would wait for Jagan's phone calls. Besides I didn't want anyone at home to receive my mail. I would jump at opportunities to travel to Delhi. I still remember, the train used to arrive early in the morning and Jagan would be there at the station to receive me. He used to insist that I only travel by AC First Class, so I used to feel like a queen. He would pick me up at the station and take me to his place at Motibagh. We would have breakfast together and then he would drop me off at my *nani's* house on Pusa Road on his way to work.

We eventually decided to tie the knot in October that year, since we couldn't bear to be apart anymore. I made it very clear that I would continue to sing even after marriage and he never objected to that. In fact, he always encouraged me to be my own person.

My husband was a furiously independent-minded person. In fact he didn't discuss marrying me with any of his family members, except his eldest brother, Bhai Saheb and his Bhabhi, fondly known as Bibiji. His bhabhi had taken care of him after he lost his parents in his childhood. At that time she too didn't have any children of her own, so they both hung on to each other. Subsequently, even though she had her own children, my husband continued to be treated as Bhapaji, or the eldest brother, by her sons. Once we were engaged, he took me to meet them. I didn't meet any of his other brothers before we got married. In fact they were not even aware that we might have been marrying at all.

Jagan had also made it very clear to my parents that he didn't want any ostentation during the wedding ceremony. My parents didn't object. It is funny that they never seemed to object to anything I ever did. They were either so excited that I was getting married or simply too enamoured of Jagan to take offence.

Anyway, we had a simple teatime civil ceremony at my *nani's* house on Pusa Road. Ammi was a witness at our wedding, Ammi and Fay Holkar, the American Maharani of Indore, who was a close friend of Jagan's.

Now Jagan was well known for his tough demeanour. Most people didn't have the guts to open their mouths in front of him. I remember a funny incident from our wedding ceremony that underscores his no-nonsense personality. The Magistrate's assistant who had come for the ceremony saw me and started gaping, "*Arre*, isn't this Shanti Hiranand?" in a foolish sort of way. He must have been a music afficianado of sorts. Poor guy! My husband gave him an icy cold glare and said to him, "It is none of your business who she is!" The matter ended there.

We got married on the 26 October 1962. The China War was on. My husband took me to meet Krishna Menon to ask for permission to take me on a short break. Krishna Menon at first refused to grant him leave on such short notice. Then Jagan mentioned that he had just got married and introduced me to Krishna Menon. Only

then did Krishna Menon relent and we were able to spend our honeymoon in Ranikhet.

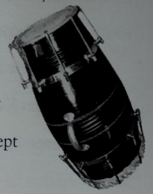
On our way to Ranikhet, at the Delhi station we bumped into some of Jagan's other nephews and nieces, who were on their way to Bareilly. On spotting him they ran up and touched his feet reverentially chanting, 'Chachaji…Chachaji…' and at the same time they gave me long and suspicious looks.

He realized that they weren't aware of who I was, so he casually announced to them, "Here, meet your Chachiji!"

I think they just collapsed with the shock. I think my husband could be very funny if he wanted and poker-faced too!

As I got to know Jagan and his family better, I realized that they were truly simple and good people and they held him in the highest of regard. They almost felt as if he was too high an official for them to hobnob with. It is a pity that we never had the opportunity to live like one great Indian joint family, but Jagan did assist them financially or in any other capacity, whenever he had the chance. His elder brother even lived with us for a while during his convalescence after his intensive thyroid therapy. But Jagan was at best a man of very few words and he was never given to making a public display of his private emotions.

Ammi had promised that even after I got married I would continue to be her student. I could visit her as often as I liked in Lucknow, and she would make it a point to stay with me whenever she was in Delhi, thus ensuring a continuity in my learning.



But in fact after a couple of visits, she stopped staying over at our place during her trips to Delhi. It suited her much more to stay at a hotel independently. Naturally it wasn't easy for my husband to accept her way of living and for her, to put up with his righteous attitude.

I remember an evening when he was particularly rude to a group of poets and *sarangiwalas*. It was well past nine o'clock. He just walked right into the gathering and ordered everyone to leave, claiming that it was too late. He unilaterally dismissed her coterie without so much as a protest.

Ammi later told me that she loved my husband very much, but he was a difficult man to like. "I am really fond of him, but he scares me sometimes," as she tried to explain why she couldn't stay with me anymore.

I still remember, when my son Nishchint was born, Ammi arrived at the hospital early in the morning, apparently out of nowhere. When I had asked her then who had sent her word of his birth, she just said that she knew instinctively! That was the kind of soul connection we shared. After his birth I was torn between the two of them. On the one hand, I knew that if I didn't go to meet Ammi when she came to Delhi the distances between us would grow. I would also long to accompany her on out-station concerts like I used to before. To his credit, my husband never stopped me from being with her, or even travelling with her, but I know it must have been a tremendous strain on my young boy. It must have been difficult for him to cope with an often-absent mother.

Gradually the distance grew between us. I would still go to her with the same enthusiasm to learn, but would often find that someone or the other had taken over her affections temporarily. Other students would arrive with exotic food and completely floor her, "Ammi, I have cooked these kebabs specially for you!" or sometimes, "Try this Chinese food, I made it for you!" And I would be relegated to the sidelines. For short spells I would feel totally alienated from her and this would pain me. Often she would completely ignore me and continue to giggle and share confidences with some of her new friends. I would feel a stab in my chest.

To a large extent I feel even my relationship with my husband could not develop into a more meaningful bond because my first priority was always my love for Ammi. It was even over and above the love and respect I felt for my parents. In fact every other relationship I formed could only be secondary to this one. As a result, after the initial attraction wore off, Jagan and I would end up bickering about most things—about his closed and secretive nature, about my need to interact with people socially, about my family being too informal! Instead of understanding and appreciating each other, we would be constantly at each other's throats hurling mundane accusations.

In fact it was only after his death when I was sorting out his papers that I learnt about the interesting and enormous work he did. It would have helped me know him so much better had he shared these details with me.

But I must admit that he was like a pillar of strength through our life together. He was also extremely proud of my talent for singing. He may not have said so in so many words, but I knew this instinctively. He would ensure that there would always be a separate area dedicated for my practice at home. He would meticulously take care of my correspondence and documents, etc. Whenever I needed to travel abroad for a concert he would fine-tune all my travel plans. He also gave me extremely sage advice in matters concerning Ammi. He would often see through several members of her coterie. In many cases I too would be blinded to their faults. And his pointing out these things would put several things in perspective for me. 15 years after he has gone I feel that he was right in many ways. His judgement of people was always correct. But I was so blinded in my devotion to Ammi that sometimes I could not see the direction he was trying to lead me in. But now in hindsight I feel that he was right all along. Right from the time of my marriage he never stopped me from pursuing my interests and for that I must thank him.

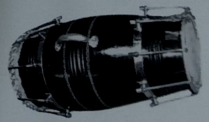
Even today I must say that my son Nishchint and daughter-in-law Neeta have maintained the tradition of giving me ample space to develop as an artist. Though my son was just twelve years old when Ammi died, he still has vivid recollections of her. And Ammi is still alive in the stories that I tell my grandchildren, Tanay and Jai. My entire family completely supports my love for music, and I know that silently my music flows and enriches their lives too.

I must record here that my husband was not an expressive man. He never attended even one concert of mine after marriage, though he would tune in to all the radio broadcasts. He hated it when people would mistakenly invite us as Mr. and Mrs. Hiranand. He would just encircle his name on these cards and have them returned with regrets. I also remember that when I presented him a recording of my *ghazals* shortly before his death, he said to me somewhat vaguely, "I guess they will appreciate this kind of music in Pakistan!"

I know that I have to an extent sacrificed my personal life in my often, irrational pursuance of Ammi. I could never be the perfect housewife or mother, and I cannot say that I am particularly proud of this.

دیوانہ بنانا ہے تو دیوانہ بنا دے -----

Deewana banana hai to deewana bana de...
Make me crazy if you will...



KNOWLEDGE

There was something about Ammi's nature that seemed curious to me in the beginning. Now, we all take our respectability for granted most of the times, are even bored of it, dreaming of doing something rare and dangerous, but for Begum Akhtar, the pinnacle of her achievement was becoming Begum Abbassi, the wife of a well-connected, highly respected lawyer. She was so proud of this that she would go to any length to protect this identity of hers.

Yet on the other hand she also felt an intense need to plumb the depths of depravity at times. I suspect this is where she drew her inspiration to sing. She would waver willingly on the edge of an anticipated heartbreak and wallow in imagined sorrow, with such cruel intensity that it was frightening.

There was a time when she had got addicted to pathedine injections. In the beginning, Dr. Das prescribed it to her to help her tide over some post-surgical pain. Then she started injecting herself every day, just for the pleasure it gave her. No matter how much Shama and I would appeal to her, no matter how much we would pray for better sense to prevail, she continued. Once I even threatened her, "Ammi, I am going to take it too, if you continue to use it!"

"How dare you," she was very upset, "it is a sin."

Still she would send Shama and me out at all odd hours to buy her vials of the drug. It used to be so embarrassing at times, because the chemist would know me personally. At the thought of asking for pathedine I used to silently die a hundred deaths for the shame of it. Ultimately in a bid to embarrass her, Shama took a shot of it herself and promptly fell to the ground. She had to be revived under medical supervision. That was when Ammi realized how dangerous it was. She broke each ampule and flushed it down the W.C. In one sweep she quit the habit. And although she suffered, she swore never to touch the stuff again. And she actually stuck to her promise, proving once again what a strong-willed woman she was!

In those days she would often brood, "I am so lonely, nobody understands me!" She would get sick of providing for her selfish family, who never really appreciated her. As soon as she would get back from a show, it would be, "This bill has to be paid" or, "So and so needs new clothes" or, "The *baniya* has come for his payment." They would never allow her to rest. In later years she would often say, "I am tired of all this, I just want to sleep peacefully."

But the fight for respectability was a losing battle she fought till the end. Even after years of being married to Abbassi Saheb I have heard of instances when people have insulted her at her face. Somebody recently told me of an incident when some *tabalchi* refused to accompany her at Lucknow Radio claiming that it was below his dignity to play for a mere *tawaif*.

Ammi's father, Syed Asghar Hussain Saheb, belonged to a highly respected family of Lucknow. He was a civil judge. As was the norm in those days, affluent men married many women for pleasure. Ammi's mother was her father's second wife. So, although she knew who her family was, those people maintained no relations whatsoever with her family. This must have hurt her in her childhood. And so she

carried this dire need for respectability from a young age. In fact her brother, Akhtar Hussain, was a highly respected District Judge when she was married in Lucknow, but again they had no contact.

From a young age, Ammi always aspired to be a woman of reckoning. She may have first tasted success as an artist in Calcutta, she may have been adored in Rampur and feted in Bombay, but it was recognition in Lucknow, this garden city of style and verve, that her heart aspired to. She was tired of the joys of stardom and came to settle down in Lucknow long before she met and decided to marry Abbassi Saheb.

Lucknow with its precarious little minarets and narrow bridges, was the home where her heart was. The fact that her father belonged to Lucknow, that her father's family never socially accepted her and that they had in turn forced her mother to leave Lucknow before her birth—almost like a fugitive—left a deep emotional void in Ammi's mind. Perhaps she wanted to somehow right all those imagined childhood wrongs in one clean sweep, by ultimately marrying a man who shared the same profession as her father, belonged to the same society and yet was willing to make her, Akhtari Bai, his begum!

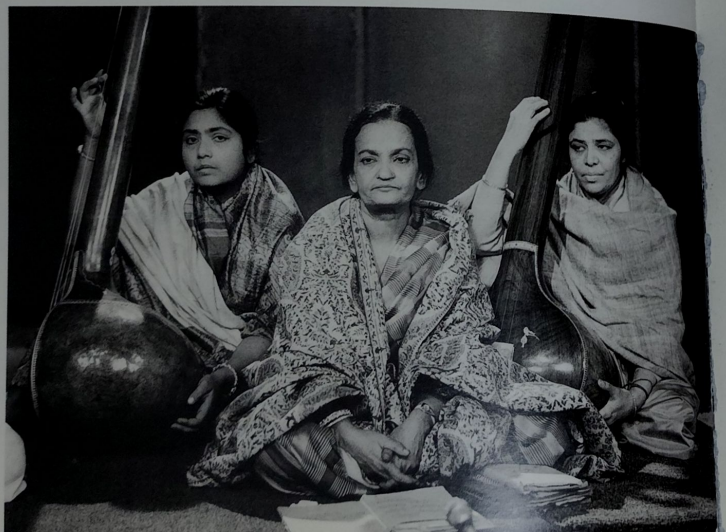
When Ammi had just got married and settled down in Lucknow, she was keen to dissolve into blissful domesticity. And she made a serious attempt at this. She would flit around town as an aristocrat's wife and thoroughly enjoyed the role for a while. Again it must be acknowledged that the well-bred aristocracy of Lucknow too on their part welcomed her with open arms into their fraternity. Nobody created so much as a fuss about having someone like her, a professional singer, in their circuit. They turned a blind eye to her past and accepted her openly as Begum Abbassi.

As Begum Abbassi, Ammi would swish around in cars in Lucknow, entertain highbrow officials from the courts, like Anand Narain Mullah and Chief Justice Mishra. Such-and-such secretary would come home to visit them, and she would charm them with her ever gracious and charitable disposition. And she had the talent for it. Abbassi had even employed a governess to tutor her in English immediately after marriage, to give

her that added polish. In the early years he also took her regularly for plays and musicals whenever there was an opportunity in Lucknow. In fact, Ammi was so overcome while watching *Hamlet*, that she miscarried the only baby she ever conceived.

Ammi was a class apart. Despite not being very educated, she conducted herself with such dignity that it was amazing. For instance, her friend Benazir Khala, who also came from the same background, couldn't have ever done this. Ammi had friends who were ICS officers' wives, she had friends who were Chief Justices' wives, and they would meet her just like ordinary people, on a completely equal footing. Yet she never overstepped her self-imposed boundaries. I remember an incident, which took place after I had started visiting her.

She was entertaining the women from Ehsaan Manzil, Abbassi Saheb's paternal home, during a Milad celebration at home. Chunnan Bibi (later Mrs. Tandon), one of her old associates, was also present. Now, Chunnan Bibi didn't think twice before



going and hobnobbing with the Ehsaan Manzil women in purdah, happily sitting with them and having tea in their company. Ammi was a bit irritated with her behaviour. She took her aside into another room and warned her in no uncertain terms, "Bibi, as respectable as we may think we are, we can never equate ourselves with these high-bred women. Don't ever overstep your boundary. Understand that and keep your distance." It was something so dignified and proper on her part to think like this, that I respected her even more for it.

On one occasion she took all of Abbu's shoes and was lovingly polishing them. He was simply aghast. "*Arre* Bibi, where are all the helpers, why are you cleaning my shoes?"

She looked at him lovingly and said, "*Arre Mian, tumne mujhe is chabootare par laake bitha diya, varna ham kahan hote?*" (My dear, you have given me this place in high society, otherwise where would I have been?)

She would always refer to him as Saheb in front of others, most respectfully, thus setting the tone for their relationship. They respected each other until the end…in fact her last words were, "*Bechare Mian!*" Yet there was something missing in their relationship. That spark called love, which was the driving force in Ammi's life, seemed to be lacking.

Of course, there were innumerable times when I would arrive at Havelock Road and the entire clan would be sitting around the verandah, tittering away, because Ammi and Abbu were locked in their quarters. And Ammi would emerge looking all tousled and embarrassed. "*Aye, hato!*" She would brush aside our sniggers.

She yearned for freedom from all this. There were times we would go over to Benazir Khala's home. The famous tabla player Ahmed Jaan Thirakwa would be visiting. Chhuttan Bhaiyya would be there. In fact, Chhuttan Bhaiyya would be the

one to organize these impromptu *baithaks*. Thirakwa Saheb would be on the tabla, Ammi and Benazir Khala would sing and Zohra Khala would break into a dance. I would try and make myself scarce in the background. There would be alcohol flowing, food being plied non-stop, and such gaiety, it would be hard to think that this was the same Ammi. She would enjoy getting drunk. These get-togethers could go on for days, or, at least, until Ammi had her fill of this life. When the hangover would pass, we would go back to Havelock Road, and Ammi would be back to her matronly role. She would cry and repent, "I am really a bad woman, to have made you suffer like this."

It would seem to me as though she had a split personality. To an extent she enjoyed her family, but beyond that she found it boring to be with any of them. Even Abbassi Saheb couldn't fathom her inner need to be bad at times. He realized this. He once sadly told me, "Don't think I am unaware of what happens at the hotels in Delhi and Bombay. I know everything. I just keep quiet. That's all."

Other times, when she was out of Lucknow, she would check into Nirula's Hotel in New Delhi, and party late into the night with her friends there. Poets would be there with their new works, musicians would stand in attendance, for the Queen of Melody. Saira Apa, sister of the Dagar Bandhu, would drop by, with Amir Qadalbaksh, her husband. Ammi had in fact played cupid in the Saira Apa and Amir Qadalbaksh's affair. Rais Mirza would drop in directly from the Russian Cultural Centre. Her room was a beehive of activity from morning to night. There would be so much happening, flirting (she even asked me to turn my face away once), drinking, merrymaking and Ammi would be the most colourful of them all. Then one fine day she would announce that she was tired of all this that she missed Lucknow, and that she wanted to go back home.

I would be so surprised. I'd say, "But Ammi, we only just arrived." She would simply say, "*Bas*, I've had enough."

She was so restless, there was no telling when she would want what! Just when I was convinced that this was the real Ammi, the one who craved to be the centre of attention, the one who enjoyed the sensuous joys of life, the one who enjoyed her chilled beers, she would suddenly transform herself into this traditional begum, who it seemed had never stepped out of the inner courtyard!

She claimed she had a personal equation with God. For days she would read the Koran like a true believer. She would tie a scarf around her head and bow the stipulated number of times. Other days she would just put the Koran Sharief away to one side. If I asked her, "*Arre*, Ammi what happened?" She would say, "*Ladai hai Allah Mian se!* I am not going to talk to him." She would have a fight with Allah! How pompuous she could be! Those days she would even drink to spite him and not even reach out to touch the holy book! "*Hamara toh aisa hi rishta hai Allah Miyan se, jab ji*

chahega tab karoongi, jab nahin chahega toh nahi karoongi. Gunehgaar toh hoon hi!" (This is my personal equation with the Lord. I will pray when I want, not when I don't. I will always be regarded a sinner in any case.)

Once while she was on a concert tour of Bombay, she suddenly decided to go to Mecca for the Haj. Though it is against the tenets of Islam to go to perform Haj in such an unplanned way, what did she care? The Haj authorities in Bombay also tried to dissuade her. She had just been there the year before with her husband. These visits were closely monitored and sanctioned by the government. She just collected her programme fees and bought a ticket and flew off. Nothing could deter her.

Now when she reached Medina, she had no money in her pocket. What could she possibly do? The Roza at Medina, the *Jaali* that covers the prophet Mohammad's resting place, is a very holy spot. She began to recite the holy *Naat* there. People collected and soon enough everyone realized who she was. Immediately the local Radio Station approached her to come and record the *Naat* on radio. She did so and received a payment for it. And thus she could complete the rest of her journey. As I was saying, she had a personal equation with God.

In time, I realized that Begum Akhtar and Akhtari Bai were both the same person, and that for her art to survive she needed to actually live the wily lifestyle of a tragic courtesan to evoke those feelings in her song. I don't think her flirtation with life was even a minor threat to her marriage. I don't even think it was a conscious decision on her part. It certainly helped her create heart-breaking music. It was definitely her muse. Yet she needed the respectability that her marriage afforded her. This was an inner dichotomy that she lived and endured.

Once, I remember her telling me that the first time she had set her eyes on Abbassi Saheb, he had reminded her of her first love Ali, the one man who betrayed her in her youth, a certain Nawab of Gaya. It seems to me her later infatuations and heartbreaks were a direct result of this primary unfulfilled relationship, as if she took sadistic pleasure in reopening those early wounds, and letting them fester just to bring out the pain.

She was performing in a private *mehfil*, as part of the Corinthian Theatre in Lucknow then. The moment she set her eyes on Abbassi Saheb in the audience that day, she had made up her mind that he was the man she would marry. She then left no stone unturned in her quest for him.

In fact, there is an interesting story of how obsessed she was with the idea of marrying him. She was once travelling by train with a society lady from Lucknow, Begum Habibullah, mother of the well-known General E. Habibullah. They got talking and Begum Habibullah asked her if she was married. She immediately said, "Yes, I am."

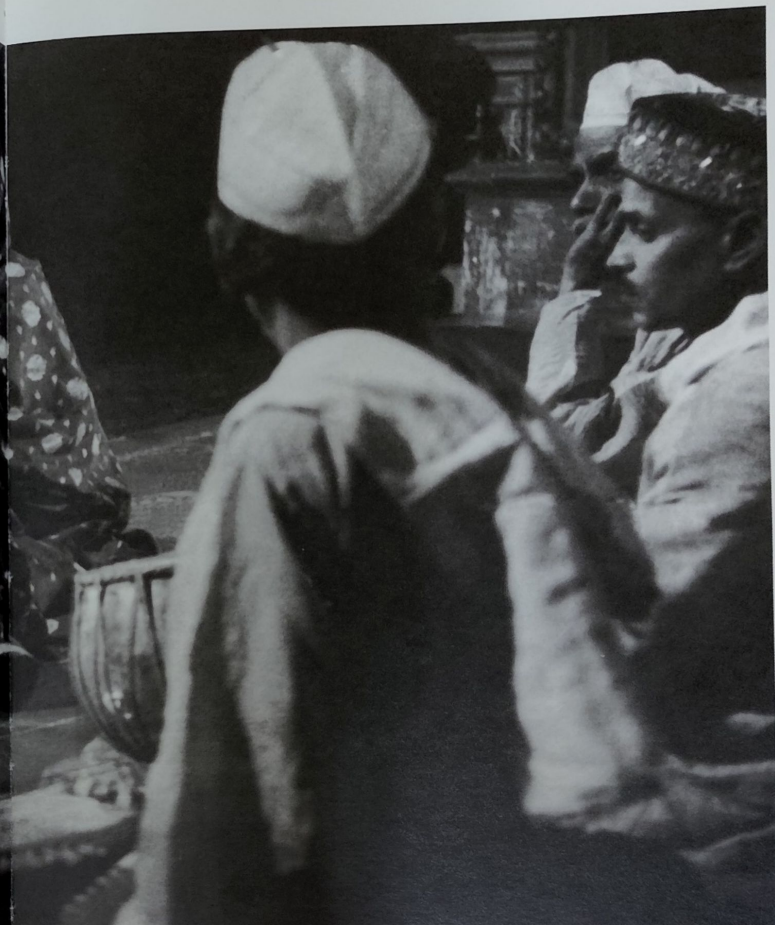
"And who, may I ask, is the lucky man?" Begum Habibullah asked her excitedly.

"Ishtiak Ahmed Abbassi," Ammi lied.

Begum Habibullah was well aware that Abbassi was still a widower. But she was too well bred to show her surprise!

Much after Ammi's marriage, Begum Habibullah invited both Abbasi Saheb and Ammi for dinner. And Ammi narrates, "When I saw Begum Habibullah, I was extremely embarassed. But Begum Sahiba was too well-bred and did not disclose their meeting on the train to Abbasi Saheb. During the course of evening Ammi was uncomfortable and even told Abbasi Saheb that she had a stomach-ache. So the couple left early and Ammi told Abbasi Saheb the truth of how she had met Begum Habibullah on the train.

Now Ishtiak Ahmed Abbassi was a man-about-town those days. Having studied abroad, he had a good practice going, especially with the deluge of zamindari court cases in that era. He was a smart lawyer from a well-connected family of Kakori. He was extremely gentlemanly and good-



looking. Though recently widowed, he was known to have a number of women friends and would go around in flashy cars. And he was spotted in all the right company. Girls from Isabella Thoburn College would swoon at the mere mention of his name. He also had a deep knowledge of Urdu poetry and a tremendous appreciation for the arts. In fact the subtle difference that was visible in the poetry that Ammi began singing after she married him, is a tribute to his taste. I remember occasions when he would tell me, *"Arre bitiya*, if you want to learn *ghazals*, you should ask me, what does your Ammi know about good poetry?" And once or twice I actually sat at his feet and jotted down some new and beautiful *shayrs*. In other words he would have been a prize catch for any *taluqedar* family.

Ammi and her mother, Mushtri Begum, on the other hand lived in the China Bazaar quarter of Lucknow in those days. Jhamman Mamu was with them then. He used to do odd jobs for them. Ammi used to also perform at home. Her listeners would come home, and they had regular *mehfils* in the old style. But she was tiring of that lifestyle. She wanted to settle down. This was in the early forties.

Now that Ammi had set her eyes on Ishtiak Ahmed, she set about finding out who he was. She even managed to meet him at a couple of *mehfils*. And needless to say, she charmed him with her attention. But she wanted to put forward her proposal to him through formal and highly respectable offices.

In those days there used to be a newsreader on Lucknow Radio, Saiyyada Abbas Raza. Saiyyada Apa who was well known in Lucknow for her flawless Urdu diction. She could speak with such a persuasive style that events would come alive in her recounting. She belonged to a well-known politically active family. She was married to an ICS officer, Abbas Raza, who was from Barabanki. She was also remotely related to Ammi's father's side. They were Shias. Now Saiyyada had fought against the social restrictions of those days and taken up a job at the Radio Station. There was a lot of opposition to this within her family. But she was a strong-willed woman and had had her way. She was quite a firebrand of her times. This is her version of how Ammi's marriage came about.

According to her, during one of her afternoon shifts sometime in 1942 when she was sitting in her booth mulling over her schedule, the swing doors suddenly flung open and Ammi walked in.

"One wouldn't call your Ammi beautiful, but there was something riveting about her damned face," she said to me in jest. "She was pug-nosed, for sure, but there was something delicate about her as well," noted Saiyyada. Ammi came to her and directly asked, "Are you Saiyyada?" When she said yes, Ammi immediately said, "In that case please arrange to get me married to Ishtiak Ahmed Abbassi." Saiyyada was completely taken aback, and mumbled something like "I'll see what I can do."

Ammi then introduced herself as Akhtari. "I faintly recalled having heard her at the Mazaar of Deva Sharief, which was close to where I lived in Barabanki. Deva Sharief was a Sufi saint who professed that love was the only true message. All manner of *tawaifs* would congregate there to perform at his annual *Urs*. I remember being in one of the tents where a group of these women were sitting and gossiping. Akhtari had been sitting towards one side, in a light pink sari, quietly removed from the chirpy sexual banter of the other women. I had been impressed with her then, I was totally shocked by what she said to me now" recalls Saiyyada.

"Anyway, the next time I bumped into Ishtiak, I took up the matter with him. I forcefully asked him what the whole business was about. He smiled coyly when I insinuated at an affair. Then I realized that they must have already met. So I proposed he make an honest woman of her. He was too much of a gentleman to refuse. And they performed a *nikaah* at his offices in Hazratganj."

Saiyyada made Ammi wear her own wedding *odhni* for the occasion, she also stood witness at their *nikaah*. They remained best of friends right until the end. For a while (perhaps for a year) after they got married, Ammi and Abbu would meet secretly at his office in Hazratganj. The fact that Abbu waited an entire year before informing his family about the marriage indicates that he knew his decision was not going to be readily accepted by his family.

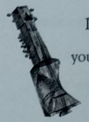
When Ammi's mother came to know of the marriage and the circumstances under which Ammi had to give up her music, she was livid. She was against the marriage as Ammi was at the peak of her career. What with all the recording companies vying for her to sign on, the movie companies queuing up outside her door, the theatres, music lovers, lovers and fans clamouring for her attention. Anyhow, once Ammi had resolved to do so, there was no turning back. So her mother had to accept that this was what her daughter wanted. Slowly, Mushtri Begum got accustomed to the situation and when she finally met Abbassi Saheb, she truly approved of him. But I am told that there was so much love between the mother and daughter that right until the end, Mushtri Begum made it a point to send a messenger from China Bazaar to Ammi's house in Nayagaon daily, to check if she had eaten something and only when he returned with a reply would she eat her own meal.

In time, Abbassi Saheb bought the Havelock Road house for Ammi. Though after Ammi's death there was a dispute as to whether it had been bought by Ammi or Abbu, I remember being told that Abbu had bought it for her, so that they could move out of his former father-in-law's house at Mateen Manzil, into a house and start their own independent life. After shifting in here, Ammi brought Shammo to live with her. She was a young girl then. When I asked Ammi about Shammo, she told me that Shammo was one of her mother's distant cousin's daughter and that she had been taken in by Mushtri Begum after her cousin had gone mad and couldn't possibly take care of the little girl. She told me that her mother had even breast-fed Shammo. So in effect she was her *hum-shira*, her sister. Of course there were umpteen stories that went around about Shammo being her illegitimate daughter, spread by people who were jealous of Ammi's fame and fortune, and I don't even consider it worth my while giving them an iota of credence.

عذرِ ستم سے دل نہ دُکھاؤ
پاسِ محبت رہنے دو ---

Uzr-e-sitam se dil na dukhao
Paas-e muhabbat rehne do
Do not distress my heart under the pretext of tyranny
Let the sanctity of love remain

Ecstasy



I remember pulling up Ammi a number of times saying, "Ammi, why do you let these people take you for a ride? Why aren't you firm? Why do you always dilly-dally?"

And she would just shrug it off saying, "What can I do? I have been trained to behave like this. I have been trained to please. I have been trained never to annoy. I have been trained not to upset my *kadardaans*. This is the only training I have received."

This was one of the fundamental differences between us. Where she had been trained to be a courtesan, she completely forbade me from even interacting with male admirers. And if the occasion ever arose and anyone tried to make a pass at me, she would rise like *Chandi*, an angered goddess, to protect me.

There were other gurus in those days I'd heard of, who would actually use their students as a pawn in their own power games, or even just for fun. I remember once she took me to a Khan Saheb for training me in classical music. He made it clear that his terms were that students, especially young women, should pay him with their affections, he wanted everything in exchange for his tuition. Ammi was aghast, "At least fear Allah!" she told him and promptly took me away from there.

Ammi took pleasure in pairing me off, once in a while with one of her well-heeled admirers, but that was just for fun and a few laughs all around in the zenana. Chhuttan Bhaiyya would be the constant butt of her jokes. He used to respect me a lot and would often bring me little presents like a packet of groundnuts or fruits. Ammi would pull his leg about it good-naturedly. She was convinced that this was an unthreatening situation, so she took pleasure in it.

She once jokingly suggested that I should marry the Nawab of Hyderabad adding that I'd be rich and famous and settled for life. We used to be invited to Hyderabad once in a while. His Highness the Nawab, Mauzam Jah, was a poet and used to invite Ammi to Hyderabad regularly. It was one of his fancies to listen to his own verse sung by Ammi. He could well afford to have us all flown there for the job. And who were we to complain? But when she realized how much older he was than me she said, "*Lahaul*, I'm not going to leave you with this old man!" and burst into helpless giggles.

Now, at Hyderabad we met this other poet who took a fancy to me. He presented me with a copy of his poems and even dedicated one *ghazal* to me! It was not as if I was very beautiful or anything, but I was young and it was all quite flattering. Soon he began spending time with me and he would tell me all about his bad marriage and what a cold and heartless woman his wife was. I was extremely sympathetic and I hung onto every word he said. You know how impressionable a young girl can be. Ammi didn't miss a thing. She immediately caught on to his machinations. She didn't say a word to me. But when we got back to Lucknow, she started avoiding me completely. It was the worst episode of my life. It is the one incident that I recall with pain even today.

She came back and announced to all concerned that Shanti Hiranand had disgracefully shoved the *paan-daan* towards her with her foot on the stage during a concert in Hyderabad. And that this was the last time she would ever take me on a tour. I couldn't understand why she said that. She just refused all my attempts at apologizing. She wouldn't even look at me and pretended as if I didn't exist.

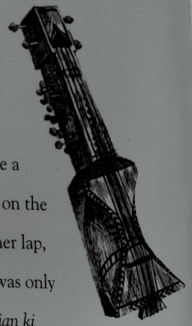
I would just sit there and cry all day. I would beg her to allow me to explain. She would just turn a deaf ear. I would lie like a dog in one corner of the house. Her other students would come and I would hear them chat and joke with her. I would feel such intense jealousy that it is difficult for me to describe this even after all these years. Shama would sometimes come to me and ask me to have my food, or at least take a cup of tea. But I would simply continue to cry.

Thus ignored, unjustly accused and maligned, there were days when I would just not feel like going back to Havelock Road. It was my mother who would prevail upon

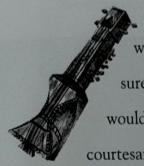
me at such times. She believed in me. She knew I couldn't have done such a thing. But she also felt that since I had accepted Ammi as my Guru, it was my duty to accept her in every mood, whether good or bad.

Chhuttan Bhaiyya too came over to my parents' house when I stopped going to Havelock Road, to try and pacify me. He told me that no one believed that I could have been so disrespectful, but I would just have to patiently wait until this mood of Ammi's passed. He was sure that she would come around eventually and everything would be like before. I wanted to believe what he said. And so I resumed going back to Havelock Road every day, if only to be insulted.

One day she was teaching a couple of ladies, wives of high-ranking government officials, who had only recently started coming to her. As usual, I sat outside the room like a pariah. She was teaching them a *dadra* that I had learnt before. Suddenly she called out to me and asked me to come and sit inside. As I watched her instruct these women, I couldn't control myself anymore, I just broke down. The tears just began to flow and I began sobbing softly at first. I then ran to the toilet and wept loudly like a child. Ten or more minutes must have passed and I continued to cry. Ammi was banging on the bathroom door. "Open up!" She commanded at first. "Open the door, Shanto I tell you!" she grew frantic, as I didn't reply. "Shanto *bitiya*, open the door," she pleaded with me.



Upon hearing her cajole me in a familiar voice, I did as she bade me. My eyes were puffy and red. My vision was blurred from all that crying. And she was crying too, "What were you doing inside? You're mad. You're absolutely silly. You fool! Don't you know how much I care for you? You are a piece of my own heart. Why are you crying like this?" Then she kissed me on the forehead. She took my hands in her own. She would have taken me into her lap, but I was much bigger than her. "Why do you take everything to heart? I was only upset because I wanted to protect you from the fate I had to face. *Allah mian ki amanat ho tum!* I wanted to protect you from that ogre of a poet. I thought if you stayed on with me, he would eat you up one day. I wanted to distance you from this lifestyle of mine!"



I appreciated this because I knew Ammi had no one to protect her when she started off on her journey to fame. Her mother was there, sure, but only to ensure that she had the right kind of clientele. She would teach her the wiles that would take her further in a career as a courtesan. The times were different then. Illiteracy and lack of initiative ensured that women were either married or kept. It was only during and immediately after the freedom movement that women in North India gained a modicum of independence. Unfortunately until then a woman who chose not to be married, or was for some reason betrayed by her lover, or defamed, was in any case branded a *tawaif*, whether she chose to be one or not.

Ammi was born on October 7, 1914. She was one of a set of fraternal twins, Akhtari and Anwari. Her twin sister died at the age of two and a half. There is not much known about the circumstances leading to her death as Ammi never talked about this. Shortly before the birth of her daughters, Mushtri Begum shifted to Faizabad from Lucknow. So Ammi really hails from Faizabad, in the mould of Umrao Jaan Ada, the other famous courtesan and poetess who immortalized this dusty town.

According to Ammi her parents separated due to Shia-Sunni differences within their families as a result of which Ammi's mother was never socially accepted by her father's family. Her father seems to have been a mere shadowy presence in their lives. Basically it was the two of them, mother and daughter, against the world.

Her father, as I mentioned earlier, belonged to a well-known family from Lucknow. There is no mention of Mushtri Begum having ever sung, but she is said to have belonged to a singer's family. I am told that Ammi resembled her mother a lot, though her mother had a broader jaw and was nowhere as polished in social graces as

Ammi. I never had the opportunity to meet her mother, because I started learning from Ammi in 1952, two years after Ammi's mother's death.

Amma or Bade Sahib, as Mushtri Begum was fondly called, guarded Ammi with a hawk's eye. Munne Khan, Shammo's first husband and Ammi's lifelong accompanist on the tabla, would often recount how Amma would sit on the balcony of her China Bazaar house and watch where Ammi went, what time she returned, who visited her, who she went out with. She ensured that only the *crème de la crème* were invited for her *mehfils* and would personally give the boot to any ruffian elements present in the crowd.

Ammi on occasions hinted towards a definite snobbery involved in the *mehfils* of those days. There were strict dress codes. Nothing less than an *achkan* or *sherwani* would do. There was also a carefully cultivated social and moral code of what one could do and say. For instance, one was expected to keep eyes lowered during conversations. There were rules regarding concert etiquette, what liberties one could take with the client, behaviour during a performance, and the mode of payment, etc. There also seems to have been a tremendous amount of snobbery surrounding the perfumes one used. Only people with class would know that *khus* and *motiya* perfumes were meant for the summer time. The heady heena was preferred in the rainy season. In winter, one could

experiment with the heavier smell of musk! Flowers were also regularly used for decorating the halls. In the summer jasmine would be very popular for its refreshing perfume. I remember even in later years at Havelock Road, Ammi would ensure that Chhuttan Bhaiyya would get jasmine for her by hook or by crook even if they were not in bloom! Ammi would even wear fresh jasmine jewellery during the months it was in bloom.

Simple things like serving paan would require months of practice, to do it just right. The way the *giloris* were decorated in a *khaasdaan*, pierced with a *supari-ki-keel*, a nail fashioned out of a slice of betel!

Even the way food was served was highly stylized. Food itself was so sensuous that it would have to appeal to all the senses. It not only had to look good, smell good and taste good, it would have to be easily digestible too. (Heaven help if a client were to end up burping!) Spices were used in such a tempered manner so as to accentuate the flavour of the food as well as its digestibility. Liberal use of *gulab jal* and *kewra* would add to the appeal of foods ranging from sweets like *shahi tukda* to *kormas* and other meat preparations. *Balaai* or cream would be used to temper excessively sweet preparations. Distinct class differences could be made on the basis of these simple habits. "How" one ate spoke volumes about one's status in society. Ammi used to tell me that people from well-bred homes would somehow manage to stain only the tips of their fingers while eating.

Since the days of the Nawabi culture of Lucknow, a courtesan used to be considered a highly respected person in society. She was supposed to be a repository of all the finest traditions. Her craft was highly specialized and a tremendous amount of training went into becoming a courtesan. They were considered trendsetters in the field of fashion and style. It used to be a matter of pride among men to be accepted by a courtesan, as her lover and not the other way around. It was a highly sophisticated profession the parallels of which may only be found in the *Geisha* traditions of Japan or in France.

The advent of the British changed all that. Overnight these women began being treated like common prostitutes because the British had no appreciation of the sophisticated role they performed. They lacked these finer sensibilities. They promptly issued medical certificates for these women and reduced their role to a mere biological function.

The Independence movement, with its war cry for *swaraj*, further undermined the role of the courtesan. And from enjoying the highest respect, these women came to be regarded as the lowest. The profession began being looked down upon. And there was a distinct vulgarization of its form.

Mushtri Begum had always ensured that there was nothing but the highest class of entertainment for the highest level of clients at their private *baithaks*. Ammi, who was extremely close to her, never took exception to her behaviour. She loved and respected her Amma very much.

Anyhow, going back to her early years, Ammi grew up in Gulabbari, in Faizabad. Ammi took me there once, though the original house was destroyed in a massive fire. Mushtri Begum shifted there before the birth of her twins and ran her establishment from there for a few years initially. I assume her husband, Ammi's father, must have paid her a maintenance, but it must have been difficult. Ammi often told me how she would cry for little silver trinkets that were so cheap in those days, but they could ill-afford them.

There was a really hilarious incident she used to narrate from those days. One day she came back home from school and refused to ever go back again. When her mother questioned her, it turned out that she had cut off her teacher Miss Bahadur's plait and was genuinely frightened to go back to face her ire. When her mother

wanted to know why she had done so, she said that since her teacher looked so beautiful with her long plait that Ammi wanted it for herself and so she simply cut it!

Ammi had an early interest in music and she would rush off to listen to any small function that was organized in the neighbourhood. She would pick up songs with ease and sing them for anyone without much protest. She used to also secretly run off with her maid to watch the *nautanki* whenever they visited their town. She was also highly taken up by an actress from those times, called Miss Chanda.

There was one incident that she recalled with clarity from this period, when an army officer liked her singing so much that he gave her a five-rupee note! That, she said, was the first time she realized she could use her voice to earn money. She was only a child. Soon the fact that she could sing was

well known. People suggested to Mushtri Begum that she should begin her formal training in music. This must have been in the mid-1920s.

She started her initial training in music with the Sarangi maestro, Ustad Imdad Khan. She even remembered the *bandish* in raag Kamod that he commenced her lessons with, *"Hoon toh jan man chhanu...."* But soon the ustad got tired of her playful nature and gave up teaching her six months later. By this time, mother and daughter had shifted to Gaya. Their house in Faizadbad had been burned down in a freak accident. They were also going through very bad times financially. So they moved in with a maternal uncle, Yusuf Khan, in Gaya. But they continued to visit Faizabad for festivals and during one of these visits Mushtri Begum took her to Ustad Sekhawat Hussain Khan, a well-known Sarod player, who suggested that she should be put under the tutelage of Khan Ata Mohammad Khan of the Patiala Gharana. Khan Saheb hailed from Multan. He was from the lineage of Taan Ras Khan. It was at Sekhawat Khan's request that Ata Mohammad Khan Saheb shifted to Gaya in those days to teach Ammi. Once he heard Ammi sing, he willingly agreed to teach her.

In those days it was the practice that an ustad shifted into the house to teach. I don't really know what the arrangements were, but he was the one who gave Ammi her first serious training in music. This is the reason that the *harkats* and *murkis*, which are popular in the Patiala style of singing, were very clearly evident in her music.

At first she was given a basic grounding in *khayal gayaki*. She said Khan Saheb would wake her up early in the mornings and start off with vocal exercises. For more than forty-five minutes he would make her practise the *kharaj*, or *sa* from the lowest register. He explained that this would make her voice as supple as rubber. Then he would make her do the scales. They would take a short pause around ten in the morning, and then start off again at noon. Then after a short nap in the afternoon they would begin their evening practice. Their *riyaaz* was extremely intense. Amma would sit with her through all these sessions.

Ammi recalled this incident, which she claimed was the real turning point in her career. Khan Saheb would continuously encourage her to put her heart and soul into practice, but she found practising the scales merely a form of vocal gymnastics. She began to wonder what it was that had drawn her to this art in the first place. One day, early morning Khan Saheb was making her practice raag Gunkali. It was the month of Ramzaan. Ammi was just unable to pay any attention to what he was teaching her. Suddenly her ears tuned in to the plaintive notes of a poor *fakeeran*, who was singing on the streets, begging for alms. She recalls this much that Khan Saheb was singing the *bandish*, *"Ananda aaj more man bhayo."* The *fakeeran* on the other hand was singing a simple song that simply pulled at her heart-strings. It was a melancholic melody in the raag Shivranjani, *"Jhaank jharoke se oh mehlon waale...."* She realized then that this was the heart and soul of music that she was seeking.

Khan Saheb too realized that she was not cut out for the rigorous and often austere form of classical singing. Her temperament was more inclined towards the deeply emotional styles of *thumri, dadra* and *ghazal gayaki*. He said as much to Mushtri Begum and started tutoring her in that style.

The emergence of *thumri* as a genre of music is credited largely to the Nawabs of Lucknow, especially Wajid Ali Shah. He was a major patron of the arts and a number of artists found favour in his court. The development of this particular style of singing can be directly linked to the development of Kathak dance. In fact the word *thumri* itself is derived from *thumak* or dance, and hence the association. It is a light classical form of music in which the stress is not laid so much on the purity of the raag as on the expression of emotions and *haav-bhaav*. Early *thumris* were usually sung in praise of Krishna dancing with the Gopis. The themes would essentially be romantic in nature and generally portray the separation and ultimate union of the divine lovers, Radha and Krishna.

There were only two particular types of *thumris* in those days, the Purabiya Ang of Benaras and the Punjab Ang Thumri. After the decline of Wajid Ali Shah, this style of singing spread to Benaras, Gaya and Punjab. With the advent of Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, a strong Punjabi style of singing Thumri developed in the last century. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan brought with him an unbelievable repertoire to embellish this style of singing. His *thumris* "*Babul mora…*" and "*Ka karun sajani…*" made the entire nation sit up in amazement. And Ammi introduced a third style so today there are three distinct styles of *thumri gayaki*, the *thumri* of Benaras, the Lucknowi style, Ammi's contribution to light classical, and the Punjabi style. Among the proponents of the Benaras Ang there is a tendency to liberally use *dohas* in Brajbhasa to embellish the main poetry. The folksy Purabiya style emphasizes the sentiments of love and longing, whereas in Lucknow the accent is on the use of beautiful *shayrs* to subtly underscore the original *bandish*. But no matter where the performers may have hailed from, the *thumri* still retains its essential *rasa*, or mood, which is *shringar*.

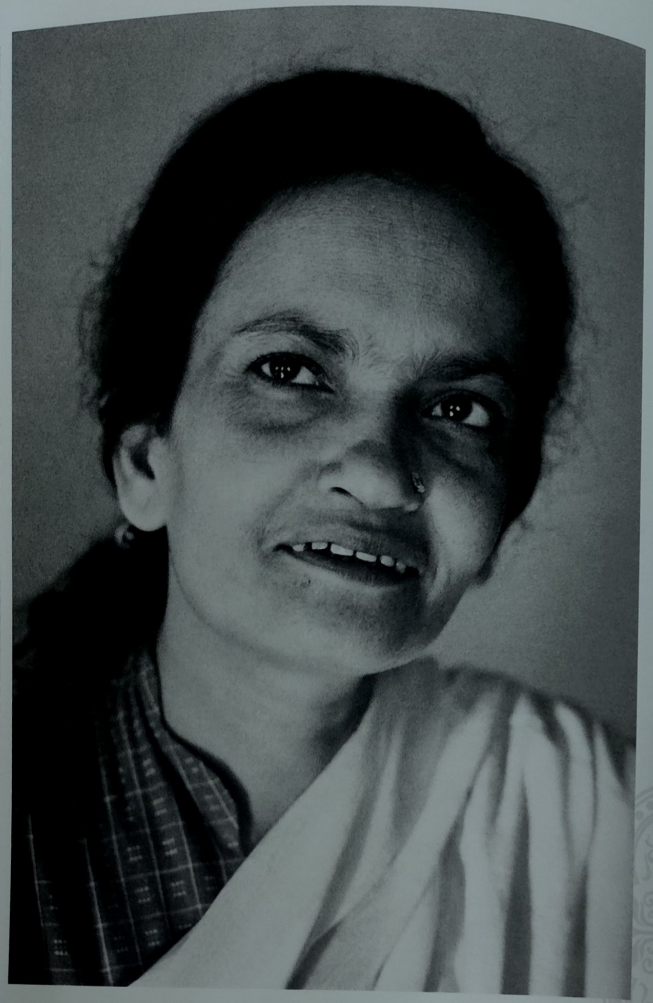
The traditional belief used to be that *thumri* singing comes second only to *khayal gayaki*, that "if *khayal* is the king, then *thumri* is rightfully the queen" of traditional Indian singing. It is a style of singing which gives equal, if not more, importance to the text. The text was in fact used with a clear intention of heightening the feeling of love and longing in the heart of the listener. You will find none of the "restraint" that is generally associated with *khayal* music.

Although this style is generally believed to be light classical, it needs to be clarified that there is nothing light in the *tayyari* or practice that a performer needs to put in to be successful in this style. The voice needs to be trained just the same way as in the case of classical singing, in order to produce the flexibility of microtones. Besides this the *thumri* also develops with the standard *sthayi* and *antara* as in the case of *khayal gayaki*.

Bol banana is an essential part of the development of the *thumri*. In this the artist embellishes the composition with specially developed musical phrases, keeping in mind the aesthetics. The ragas used in this style of music are also more fluid. One finds a lot of overlapping of raags in the general development of *thumris*. Raags like Kafi, Khamaj, Bhairavi, Pilu and Kamod are used a lot in this style.

Since this style was specially suited to women performers, for a long time it remained the preserve of *mujrewali bais*. In the last century we witnessed a number of such stars like Gohar Jaan, Badi Motibai and Rasoolan Bai who promoted this art through *mehfils*.

Of course over time a number of gharanas began adopting this style in their repertoire. Especially, Abdul Karim Khan of the Kirana Gharana, who immortalized the *thumri*, "*Piya ke milan ki aas….*" After this it became customary to impart training



in *thumri gayaki* in the Kirana tradition. But their rendition does not possess the folksy lilt of the Purab Ang, and this has always been a cause for criticism. Also, the emotive content or *bhaav* of the Kirana *thumri* is much milder than the original Purabiya style. The tempo they use is also much faster than the ordinary *thumri*, to facilitate the showcasing of some *tayyar tans*. Purists tend to agree that their style is more like singing a *khayal* in the *thumri* style.

Over the years Ammi developed a style completely peculiar to her. Initially her style was an amalgam of the Purabiya folk style of the region, blended with the sophisticated use of Urdu poetry and richly embellished with Patiala style of singing that Ata Mohammad Khan taught her. In later years elements of the Kirana Gharana added the special emphasis that she laid on the purity of the *sur* or note. There was a particular way in which she introduced a particular note into a musical phrase. The resting points she used in the space of development of a piece and the ease with which she would evoke a note were hallmarks of the Kirana style that she imbibed from Ustad Vahid Khan.

Ammi's style of singing was entrenched in the folk traditions of the region. Despite the fact that she trained intensively in the classical forms of Kirana and Patiala, she only bared her heart and soul through this type of folk music. In every song she sang, she became the *nayika*, she transformed herself into Radha and one could actually feel the pain of her separation from Krishna. Her *thumris* and *dadras* were always rounded off with poetry in chaste Urdu, in the true traditions of Lucknow, where since the times of Amir Khusro the accent had been on the synergy of using multiple languages as means of expression.

She even straddled the complex world of *taal*. It is said Munne Khan played a special version of *deepchandi* to keep pace with her, which had 16 *matras*, as compared to the standard 14 *matras*. He secretly blended in two extra *Tirkits* to allow her the space to further develop her composition.

Besides, there was also an irrational element in her style, which appealed to her audience. And this stemmed from her essential nature, which was inherently inconsistent. For instance, you would see a servant girl in the house wearing one of her favourite saris, with no explanations as to how and why it lost favour! This element of taking you by surprise was what people came to revel in at her concerts.

Her music seemed drenched in pathos, with a strong undercurrent of melody. Her voice would in fact crack at a particular point, which would be considered flaw in ordinary circumstances, but in her case this was what people went to listen to. Often at her concerts people would wait until the right emotions would build up to bring out the pain and make her voice catch just so, and they would feel that they had got their money's worth!

She would always remain loyal to her opening notes. She would start her *misra* or phrase from a certain place, sing an entire scale and come back, weaving a melodic pattern along the way, returning to the same note, resting and pausing briefly, before taking flight again. Her notes would always appear as if they were arranged in a beautiful bouquet, where not even one flower would seem out of place. She would always tell us that one's music should be like the colours on a canvas and care should be taken that the colours never spilled out of the frame; that there should always be an imaginary margin within which one experimented with *sur*. And that was in essence the simple beauty of her expression.

That was also one of the reasons why she limited her instruments to the traditional sarangi, harmonium and tabla. In general Ammi kept to her set accompanists who were aware of what exactly she needed from them during the course of a concert. They were perfectly in tune with her requirements. Of the *tabalchis*, Munne Khan remained loyal to her through his life. He always accompanied her for her radio programmes in Lucknow and would travel to Calcutta with her too. Ghulam Sabir Kadri would usually accompany her on the

sarangi for the local recordings. In Bombay and Poona, usually Mohammad Ahmed accompanied her on the tabla, while Asghar would be on the sarangi. Sultan Khan too has accompanied her on a number of occasions in Bombay. There used to be a sarangi *nawaz*, Bade Ghulam Sabir from Kanpur, who was quite a favourite of Ammi too.

It was only much later that she experimented with different sounds, like the clarinet, violin, etc. These decisions too were based on her personal rapport with the artists who played these instruments. If she grew "emotionally attached" to someone in particular, she would launch him under her banner. For instance if she took a liking to a sitar player, she would encourage him to perform with her on all her concerts. When she grew tired of him, he would be dropped from the agenda, and in his place we would find some young and talented violinist instead! As a result of this a number of artists claim to have accompanied her on stage. And it may well have been so because she did give a number of new artists a chance to perform. But there were a host of frauds out there too, who were trying to make a quick buck by these tall claims.

Another trademark of Ammi's performance was her glittering diamonds. They would alternately tease and cajole the audience, in an imitation of her own mannerisms. These flashing stones would keep the audience enthralled through her performance as if they were an extention of her *adayagi!* Even today when I meet her fans, they always recall her flashing smile, her glittering diamond nose-pin, her delicate diamond ear-tops with tremendous nostalgia.

The first public performance that Ammi gave was a fundraiser held in Calcutta after a massive earthquake in Bihar in the early 1930s. Ammi was very young then. She had accompanied Khan Saheb to attend this concert as a part of the audience, but a happy turn of events threw her centrestage instead. The performer on that occasion was delayed or unable to perform and Ata Mohammad Khan suggested his

protégé, Ammi, sing in their place. She was hoisted onto the stage. Every time the curtains went up, she would take fright and run away from the stage. It was only when Khan Saheb convinced her that he would accompany her, that she began to sing. Once she began, there was no stopping her. A hush fell over the audience. And she was hailed as the new star, Akhtari Bai Faizabadi.

In the audience that night sat the nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu, who was so drawn to the young Akhtari's talents that she even came backstage halfway through the programme to congratulate Ammi and later sent Ammi her first khadi sari.

Almost immediately, after this show Ammi started being called to give concerts all over the country. Ghosh Babu from the Megaphone Company offered to record her. I met him years later with Ammi in Calcutta, and he proudly presented me with a set of 28 records of Ammi. He told me that the first time he recorded Ammi, she broke down and started crying. She had just completed recording her first album, *"Woh aseere daame balaa hoon main…"* and refused to go on. When everyone asked her why she was crying, she is supposed to have said in a small voice that, "I feel that this recording machine will spirit away my life alongwith my voice. If something happens to me today and my mother listens to my voice on these records, won't it break her heart?" She was heart-wrenchingly innocent.

In point of fact Ammi was also recovering from a broken heart in those days. So all the extra work must have helped her focus more seriously on her career. She had just loved and lost her one and only true love Ali, a landlord from Gaya. According to her, she had gone to visit him after one of her recording sessions in Calcutta. When she took the flight of stairs to his place, she caught him red-handed with an Anglo-Indian girlfriend of his. They had a huge row and she left him, never to look back again. She admitted that he was the only man she had ever loved in her life.

In those days it was the norm for artists to attach themselves to some princely state as an artist in residence. Ammi then took up a post at Rampur. The Nawab of Rampur, His Highness Raza Ali Khan, was an extremely erudite and scholarly man. He is famed to have written a number of times on music and maintained an unsurpassed library. He took on musicians and artists as his *ganda-bandh shagirds*. Ammi was one such. She told me that she and her mother had a beautiful house to themselves on the outskirts of the city and cars to move around in town. It was really wonderful for her career-wise. She would tell me stories about the fabulous food that would be served at the palace.

There were a number of artists attached to the court in those days. Ustad Mushtaq Hussain Khan, Allauddin Khan and Hafiz Ali Khan, Amjad Ali's father, are the names that come to mind. Among the tabla players, Ahmed Jaan Thirakwa, was well established too. But it was said that Ammi was the apple of the Nawab's eye. For one thing she was so young, and besides she may have been the only female vocalist on the rolls. Anyway, there is no denying that she was a jewel of the Rampur court.

There is an incident that Ammi often recounted from Rampur. This was during a time when she had not yet made a name for herself and her mother had brought her from Calcutta to have her fortune read. A *Pir baba* there asked her to open her book of couplets and place her finger on any *ghazal*. It happened to be *"Deewana banana hai to deewana bana de…"*, one of Behzad Lucknawi's works, prophesying that she would make a name for herself if she sang it. And that single *ghazal* made her a household name in northern India.

The Nawab's family was extremely kind to her. She exchanged gifts regularly with the family. She is supposed to have even presented His Highness' son with a car! So I don't see where the controversy regarding the Nawab of Rampur stemmed from. But it is a fact that she left Rampur overnight and shifted her base to Calcutta. When I

questioned her about this, she only said that Rampur was a dangerous place for a woman to stay… *"Humse nikaah karne ko kaha gaya tha. Aese mein hamara toh gana bajana sab band ho jata. Wahan toh tumhe pata hai ki chhuriyan chalti thi bibi,"* she said in her typical dramatic *andaaz*. (I was proposed to. I realized I would have to give up singing. You know how people flash daggers there at the slightest provocation….)

She was also under a contract to perform for the royal family of Kashmir. She was required to make herself available for their concerts on an occasional basis. This allowed her the freedom to follow her own career needs in the interim periods.

As I was saying, she moved overnight to Calcutta after her spell in Rampur. It was the time when the theatre movement was peaking in Calcutta. K.L. Saigal, K.C. Dey, C.P. Barua and others had all risen from Calcutta theatre. She soon found a job at a theatre to make ends meet. She would act and give background scores as well. This was where she found a huge audience. She became a star. There was nothing she touched that didn't turn to gold, and money started pouring in. She acted in a number of movies of the East India Film Company, films like *Ek Din ka Badshah, Nal-Damyanti, Mumtaz, Naseeb ka Chakkar*. These made her extremely popular and she started being known as Akhtari Bai, film star! It was no mean achievement. She later even did a film with Satyajit Ray, *Jalsaghar*, in which she played the role of a classical singer.

When I recall her Calcutta days, I am reminded of the time when she guilelessly took me to Calcutta, to launch me in the theatre. "I earned a name for myself in the theatres, you will be famous too!" she promised me.

My father had suffered huge losses in business in those days. In all sincerity she felt that by getting a permanent job for me in the theatre, she could help my family and me tide over those difficult times.

One of my sisters was married and used to live in Calcutta. Her husband was a senior official with the Union Carbide Company. They used to live in a really posh part of the town. When she heard that I was coming to Calcutta to join the theatre, she was very concerned and advised me against it. I was such a *chamchi* of Ammi's that I didn't care two hoots for my sister's advice.

To get to the theatre we had to literally wade through the famous back alleys of Calcutta, jump over open drains and pass the gunnysack-covered rear entrances to the theatres. Naughty Nepali girls were ruling the roost in Calcutta theatre in those days. Painted faces stared quizzically at Ammi and me as we passed. We both looked so middle class and out of place there. Things had really gone to the dogs in the theatres. Ammi hadn't realized that. Before coming here she had simply spoken to someone over the phone. She imperially directed the owner of the theatre company to employ me at two thousand rupees a month plus expenses. She had made it clear that I wouldn't make any stage appearances and that I would only provide background vocal support. The man had seemed surprised by her terms, because the theatre was used as a launching pad for other related career opportunities, and the whole point was to be seen!

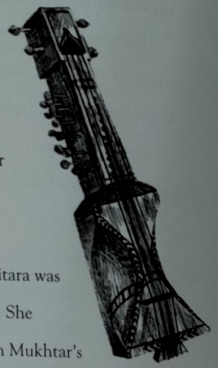
But when Ammi saw the painted faces of the Nepali girls on the way she screamed, "*Lahaul*, you are not going to work here!" She turned back from there without even bothering to cancel her appointment with the owner.

I am sure she had good intentions and did not realize how bad things were. As far as I was concerned, she could have sold me for all I cared. The point was to be with her.

Anyway, Ammi's career really took off in Calcutta. Those were more elegant and classic times. This was sometime in the late 1930 and she was performing at the theatre. There were recordings with the Megaphone Company that kept her busy. Besides she was also performing at *mujras* and *jalsas*, which were held regularly at the

houses of the rich and famous in Calcutta. In those days artists were encouraged to sing and show the *haav-bhaav*, during the performances. Singers were expected to break into a dance during the *teental ki laggi*. Ammi said this was something she couldn't do. So other artists must have accompanied her. They must have performed while she sang. This is a point I never clarified with her, because I respected her too much to ask her these details freely. Whatever I know is what she told me of her own accord. Her fans have told me that while she may not have had a great classical singer's repertoire, when she sang everyone in the audience felt that she was singing for him and him alone.

It was in Calcutta that the noted film director Mehboob first found her suitable for a role in his film, *Roti*. He brought her to Bombay in the 1940s to pursue a career in the movies. She was contemporary with artists like Sheikh Mukhtar, Sitara Devi and others. Munne Khan used to tell us interesting tales from the shootings in those days. According to him Sitara Devi had actually fallen head over heels in love with Sheikh Mukhtar. They were also paired together in the film as "tribal" youth, wearing funny *hula-hula* skirts and silly bikini-tops. Can you imagine Sitara Devi in that get up? Sheikh Mukhtar wouldn't pay any attention to Sitara at that time. Now in a dramatic development in the film, Ammi and her beau, Chandramohan, crash-land into their tribal village and their lives. Now Ammi was an elegant city slicker and obviously the tribal in Mukhtar took a fancy to her sophisticated ways, on screen as well as off screen. This made Sitara Devi extremely jealous, which only enhanced her performance on celluloid! Ammi caught on to the fact that Sitara was extremely envious of her, so she took her into her confidence. She wickedly suggested ways in which Sitara could capture Sheikh Mukhtar's attention, by some homemade black magic. This led to some hilarious scenes on the sets and much baffooning, ultimately thawing the ice between them all. At the end of the film, circumstances lead to Ammi dying tragically in the desert. The film caught the audience's imagination. She soon started getting fabulous offers in films.



Once the film offers started pouring in, her music took a back seat. Ata Mohammad Khan Saheb completely disassociated himself from her newly acquired star status. He was disappointed with the kind of life she began to lead and in a short time he went away. So as far as music went, she was completely on her own. As a result of this she had to face some particularly embarrassing moments when she was invited to a prestigious music conference in Bombay. All the luminaries from the world of classical music were there. Gauhar Jaan had come down from Lahore, Zohra Jaan Ambalewali and others were there too, stalwarts from the world of classical music. As each singer took up the mike, Ammi began to rue her lack of *tayyari* (preparation).

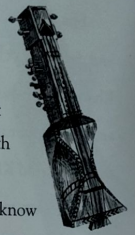
It is true that she had a style all of her own, but as far as classical inputs were concerned, she found herself unprepared. It is a fact that she had been trained completely in the classical traditions, but in those days she was mainly singing light classical, even her confidence to sing classical music was shaken by listening to these artists.

She didn't have the nerve to perform before them. She went home that same day and decided to change all that. She started training under the famous Behre Vahid Khan Saheb, also guru of Hirabai Barodekar of the Kirana Gharana. Munne Khan and her mother used to live with her in Bombay and she resumed her *riyaaz* in right earnest. Vahid Khan Saheb told her to forget everything that she had learnt so far, and to relearn music from scratch. It goes to Ammi's credit that without creating a fuss she did exactly as he bade her. This incident really highlights her humility.

Recently I met well-known music critic Raghav Menon in connection with some TV programme on Ammi. He told me that he had once travelled with Ammi on a Srinagar-Delhi flight. He said he couldn't help but tick her off regarding the purity of her *swaras*. According to him, she took his criticism to heart and sulked a bit through the flight. When they landed in Delhi, she turned to him and said, "If you had to live the life that I have lived, you would know how difficult it had been to maintain any purity at all!"

So although it is true that as far as her *raagdari* was concerned she may not have been very pukka, despite her intense training in *khayal gayaki*, but when it came to a matter of aesthetics, she was right up there. If anything, she was pure aesthetics. Even her guru, Ata Mohammad Khan had admitted that her music was *bhav pradhan*, one that essentially appealed to the emotions. This was highlighted by the *fakeeran* story I recounted earlier. As far as her style of singing *thumri* was concerned, she was to the manor born. For her the music she sang was like her mother tongue. There were no rules. And she sang with her heart, with no holds barred.

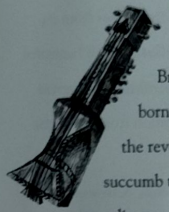
Then all of a sudden she quit it all to marry Abbassi Saheb in 1944. And gave up singing, putting an end to a career that had spanned over a decade and a half, in all sincerity. The fame, the stardom, the years of training, she willingly gave it all up to marry this attractive young man, who she claimed looked like her first love. She was a whimsical and impulsive woman of many strange and interesting pursuits. That is the least I can say about her. For the next five years she actually never touched her instruments. Although someone once took me to a hall in Naqkhas in Lucknow, and claimed that she had performed there even after her marriage in a bid to earn some money for her lavish lifestyle. It was a large musty hall, full of beautiful old chandeliers and lanterns, with old carpets spread out on kaccha flooring and a stunning atmosphere. There was an old retainer there who said that all the rich people of Lucknow used to gather to listen to Begum Akhtar. He even sang snatches of Ammi's



unrecorded music, but he may have been an old fan. I *don't* believe him. Why would she do that? She was so conscious of Abbu's family honour. Why would she jeopardize her hard-earned respectability all for the sake of some money? It just doesn't make sense to me.

I firmly believe that she only resumed her singing after her mother died in 1950. She had suffered a nervous breakdown and the doctors suggested that she needed an outlet for her emotions, and that ideally singing would help her recover. So in those days she started singing on the radio, as it gave her the perfect opportunity to perform honourably. I had in the meantime come back to Lucknow with my parents in 1947. And I was performing on Lucknow Radio too. It was here that I first heard of her. And our lives were inextricably intertwined forever more.

The significance of Lucknow in shaping Ammi's music cannot be ignored. What we can't forget is that Lucknow stood guard of the nation during the crucial time between the fall of the Mughals and the arrival of the British. In fact, the city stood up valiantly against the British forces in the first war of independence in 1857. This is borne out by the 140 days siege of the British Residency during the revolt. The city effectively ousted the British forces, only to succumb to a British counter-attack in 1858. The era thus spawned a peculiar type of indigenous secularism, untainted by any known foreign ideology.



With the advent of the Independence movement, the city witnessed the congress culture creep in among its many other well-entrenched traditions. Khadi and the *charkha* made an appearance into the daily life of Lucknow. And post Independence, Lucknow, as the capital of one of the largest states in independent India, Uttar Pradesh, continued to have an impact on national politics, up until the recent saffronization of the region and the fall of the Babri Masjid. This has arguably been

the lowest point in the history of this culturally blessed land, with political turmoil being the order of the day.

The mood of the city has always been of that of an evening. *Sham-e-avadh*, is evocative of long boat rides down the river Gomti, lovers meeting at dusk, poets reading out their verse to the lighting of lamps, energetic *patangbaazi* and *baterbaazi* were commonplace as were regular *mehfils* and *majmas*. Even at Abbassi Saheb's house there used to be regular *baithaks* in the evening, when poets would come and read from the work in progress. As there was no TV in those days, this was a form of drawing room entertainment for the sophisticated people of those days. In fact we all used to be encouraged to answer each other back using chaste couplets in Urdu.

The arts and crafts had attained unsurpassed heights since the times of Wajid Ali Shah. The city has been witness to new and interesting idioms of entertainment, be it literature from the medieval poets right up to the progressive writers movement, the development of Kathak into a ballet form and transformation of the *thumri* from its simpler, more rustic Purabiya ballads to sophisticated songs embellished with beautiful couplets in Urdu, sung in varying tempos, at every step complementing the progress of the Kathak dance form. In fact early film music drew its inspiration from this light classical form native to Lucknow.

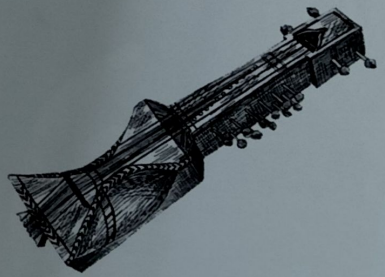
The Nawabi culture of the last few centuries had also historically bestowed women with an opportunity to explore their own sexuality. The "non-traditional traditional" and the "unconventional conventional woman" manifested herself in Lucknow on the eve of 1857. Women like Hazrat Mahal and others of her time were equally adept at the art of lovemaking, as they were at playing the game of war. Women like Umrao Jaan Ada and her protégé, Azeezun Bai, were famed to write revolutionary yet, beautiful *Rekhti* poetry.

Another peculiarity of the city is its distinctly feminine character. It has always laid immense amount of stress on style, mannerisms and vanity. The *nafasat* and the *nakhra* of the local gentry somehow heightened its flavour. To grow up in Lucknow ensured that you would automatically ensure that one would have spunk and style in dress, be a natural born connoisseur of perfume, know the right *adab* or way to greet an elder, a colleague or someone younger than you. Nobody had to teach you these things. The environment just ensured that you acquired these and other fine tastes in your mother's womb.

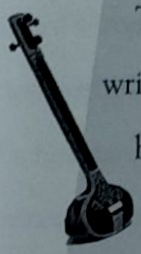
I know this because I was born in Lucknow and also spent most of my life here before I got married. I grew up during the freedom struggle, when much of this *tehzeeb* was diluted by other newer, more pragmatic ideologies. But you can imagine the times when Ammi grew up; the atmosphere must have been a hundred times more intense.

اُن آنکھوں کا عالم گلابی گلابی----

Un aankhon ka aalam gulabi gulabi...
The state of those eyes is so very captivating...



Truth



There was this madman Hashmat, who roamed the streets of Lucknow, writing "Hai Akhtari" on all the walls. Nobody knew who he was or where he came from and he was beaten up umpteen times. But he was so obsessed with her that he would swagger around town singing her *ghazals*, claiming that she had driven him crazy, in a throwback to her first hit album, "*Deewana banana hai toh, deewana bana de…*" Years ago, I remember, he even came over to my house, supposedly to sell my mother some lemons, claiming they were from Akhtari's garden. I remember initially people had even accused Ammi of using him as a publicity stunt! But he was a symbol of the kind of extreme madness that could come over her admirers.

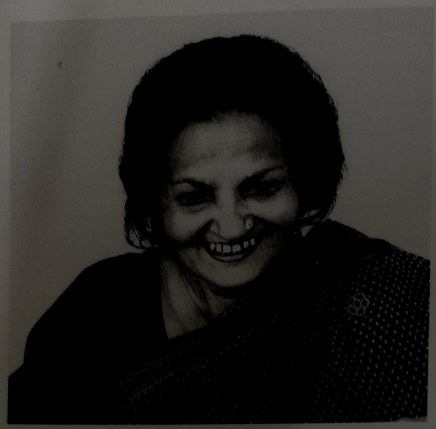
Ammi was such a charmer that anybody who came in contact with her couldn't but be disarmed. Whether it was a night guard at a railway station in a remote Maharashtrian village, whose lantern she confiscated until he got her a pack of Capstan from outside the station, while the train awaited the signal, or an established poet like Jigar.

Jigar Moradabadi and his wife would come and stay at Havelock Road quite often and she would personally take care of their comforts. They were treated like state

guests. I remember how she would flirt openly with Jigar. Once she jokingly threatened him, "I think I should marry Jigar Saheb. Imagine what children we would have, blessed with my voice and your talent with words!"

He was amused. Fittingly he countered, "But what if they ended up looking like me?" He had the entire *mehfil* in fits, including his wife. Jigar was a particularly grotesque-looking man. But such was her charm and her deep appreciation of his talents, that she would make him feel as if he were the handsomest man on earth!

Ammi was in the habit of doing everything simultaneously. On the one hand she would be running this vast establishment at Havelock Road, playing at being the good wife to Abbu and even manage her concerts and tours with steely determination. There were no star managers and secretaries in those days, any entertainment companies or promoters either, to ensure that dates didn't clash. In fact over the years I have seen a similar pattern creep into my own life. Along with imbibing her music I seem to have also subconsciously picked up her talent for multiple tasking! For she would manage everything herself—run a decent household, cook meals for special guests, do her *riyaaz*, pray, shout at us all and perform at concerts with equal passion.



I don't think there was any artist in those days who did not know her. Anyone associated with the field of music would invariably end up being her guest at Havelock Road.

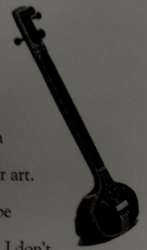
I remember, Kumar Gandharvji would arrive periodically with his *jhola* slung casually across his shoulders. He would make it a point to visit her whenever he was in Lucknow for a programme. He would be treated like royalty. Short of anointing him with a *tilak*, she would ensure he was given state honours. He was a vegetarian and to Ammi's credit that she would first bathe and then cook his food with her own hands. He on his part loved her as an elder sister and partook hospitality without so much as a fuss. She really respected his genius as an artist and the fact that they both believed in singing with their hearts. I remember tagging along with Ammi when she visited Kumar Gandharvaji at his hometown in Devas. We had travelled there together with Mr. Datar, the Collector of that region, as well as a great fan of Kumarji. We had taken a narrow gauge line upto Nasik and then completed the rest of the journey by road. We had a simple home meal with him and his family and sang too.

Ammi was on very good terms with Hirabai Barodekar. For a start she was Abdul Karim Khan's daughter, and then they belonged to the same gharana, the Kirana Gharana, as Ammi too had trained under Behre Vahid Khan. She would make it a point to visit Hirabai whenever she was in Bombay. Ammi held other contemporary women artists like Siddheshwari Devi and Rasoolan Bai, in high esteem. Although she and Siddheshwari Devi never interacted much, there was an unspoken appreciation. Rasoolan Bai had visited Havelock Road once to my knowledge.

Ammi had a soft corner for the composer Madan Mohan. And he on his part was a big fan of hers. Madan Mohan was the son of Rai Bahadur Chunilal, one of the Directors of Bombay Talkies. In fact his musical career had kick-started with him memorizing her songs as a young man. This was quite well known in music circles.

She would often playfully accuse him of lifting her tunes for his film songs. But she almost always forgave him. They would often check into adjoining rooms at the Airlines Hotel in Paharganj and spend hours composing and singing together. Drinks would flow like water and spirits would often grow warm and high! He was a big drinker and was known to be quite a womaniser. She knew he was a big flirt and he too was well acquainted with Ammi's past. They understood each other perfectly and there was no scope for any hypocrisy in their relationship. They both felt absolutely at ease. People who couldn't understand this would naturally pass judgements on their being together like this, a man like him and a woman like her; they felt there must have been something going on between them. But Ammi didn't care two hoots for what anyone would say. And I stand guarantee that nothing but music flowed between them. When they would be together it would be my job to keep the drinks flowing. So many times she would ask me to sing something for him, but I would get so nervous that I couldn't utter a word. But one thing I must say for the man, for whatever other weakness he may have had, he was so creative and he could do wonders with raag Bhairavi!

I remember, Aziz Ahmed Warsi of Hyderabad sang this beautiful dadra "*O bedardi sapne mein aaja, kuch toh bipatiya kam hoi jaye…*", for Ammi and me. He used to have an attractively grainy voice in those days, and it carried off this composition with ease. I remember listening to him singing it for Ammi, as he reclined on Ammi's bed at Nirula's Hotel in Delhi.



The famous Raoof Mian from Hyderabad too would come and sing specially composed tunes for her, and his eyes would brim over with tears, even as he brought alive each nuance of meaning in his song. The artists in those days were completely immersed in their art. There was such a high degree of fidelity to the art form, whether it be painting, music, dance or writing…there was so much commitment. I don't say that this commitment is in any way lacking today, but I have to admit that the focus has shifted from the art per se to the money it can bring in.

In fact, Ammi had friends from all walks of life. Even out-and-out intellectuals and professors were big fans of hers. I particularly remember these young men, Shahid Agha and Salim Kidwai, who were teaching at Hindu College, Delhi University. They were part of her entourage when she visited Delhi. Shahid was a poet who later moved to the United States. He unfortunately died young of a brain tumour. I am told that even when he had slipped into semi-consciousness during the last stages of his disease, he would often hum some of the poetry that Ammi had sung. He had even written a poem on Ammi, which I still have with me.

One incident involving Firaq Gorakhpuri is etched in my mind. This happened shortly before Firaq died. Ammi had gone to see him at his hotel in Paharganj. He was breathing heavily. But he had a warm smile for her. He gave her one of his *ghazals*. He was keen that she should sing it for him. The words were like this, "*Sham-e-gham kucch us nigahe naaz ki batein karo, bekhudi badhti chali hai raaz ki batein karo…*". He had tears in his eyes once she had sung it.

Jigar in fact was so overcome by her rendition of his poetry that he once actually had a heart attack. This was right after she sang, "*Kis ka khayal kaun si manzil nazar mein hai, sadiyan guzar gayin ki zamana safar mein hai.…*"

Then there was Madhukar Golwalkar, a well-known musician from Poona, who taught Ammi several bandishes. Madhukarbhai was such a creative man that it was amazing to be in his presence. He used to play the israj. And he worshipped Ammi. Short of putting Ammi's photo on the wall, and doing an *aarti*, he did everything in his power to make her feel revered. He would land up in Bombay as soon as she arrived there. Then he would be her odd job man at her hotel, helping her in any capacity, setting the tunes for her new pieces, perfecting something or the other, tinkering with her instruments. He would do just about anything for her.

On her part she would always go to his place when she was in Poona. After she passed away, he had made a special pilgrimage to Lucknow, to pay his last respects. He cried so much.

Ammi was deeply attached to Anjanibai Malpekar, the doyenne of the *Bhendi Bazaar Gharana* in Bombay. Although Anjani Bai was really old and frail at that time, she would always call Ammi for a meal before she went back to Lucknow. I followed Ammi wherever she went in those days. I didn't know then what great stalwarts these people were. Anyway, Anjanibai would keep talking to Ammi in Marathi and Ammi would happily reply her in chaste Urdu, which made for very funny conversation. But I guess what flowed between them was their mutual love and respect, and in those circumstances words were meaningless.

Ammi eventually asked her to teach us *thumris* from their *gharana* and we would both sit on the floor next to her and learn eagerly from her. Anjanibai taught Ammi that famous *thumri*, "*Main toh tore damanwa lagi maharaj…*," which I had later recorded for the movie *Dance of the Winds*. She used to sing a line and instruct Ammi to follow. As soon as Ammi had learnt the tune, she would embellish it with her own style, and Anjani Bai would break into *wah wahs* appreciating her full-throated rendition. Often Ammi would deliberately make little mistakes, so that Anjanibai would sing in order to correct her, and we could listen to her rich voice. Those were such wonderful times.

Deodharji, the eminent musicologist and prime student of Vishnu Digambar Paluskarji, was also one of her friends. I remember she had once taken special lessons from him to learn the various styles of raag Todi. And he had taken such pleasure in explaining the finer points of the raag to her. She was so curious for knowledge and so

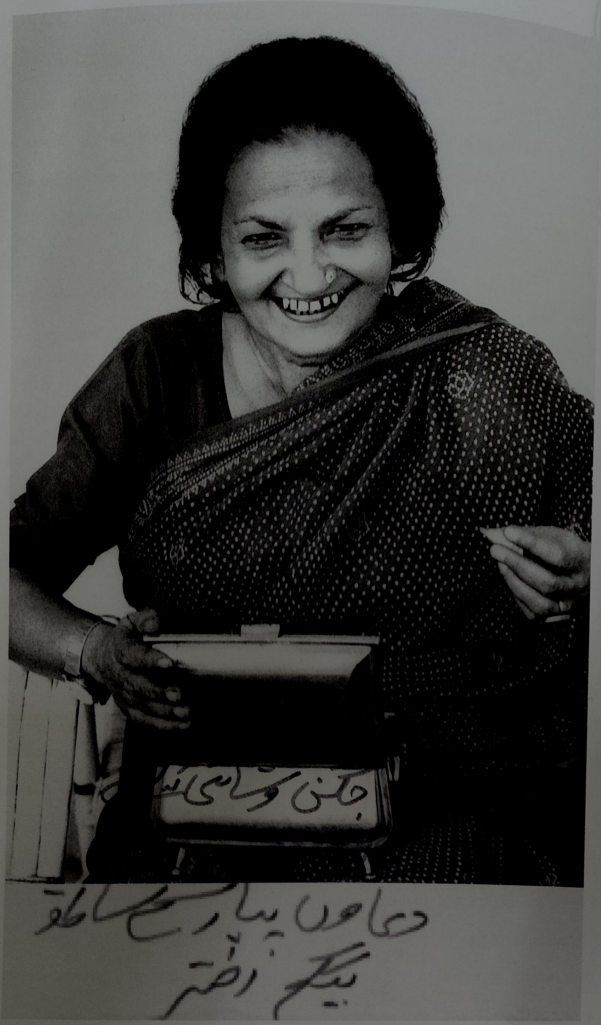
humble that even after becoming a living legend, she never felt embarrassed exposing her lack of detailed knowledge of classical music.

Gullu Bhai Jasdanwala, a student of Alladiya Khan Saheb, was also one of her great admirers in Bombay. A Khoja Muslim, he belonged to a very rich stud farm owning family. But he was so committed to his art that he had remained single all his life to follow his heart. He was a straightforward and simple man. He was Kesarbai's *Gurubhai*.

Gullu Bhai's student Shruti Sadolikar has made a name for herself. Gullu Bhai's voice was full of *gamak* and *murkis*. Ammi had also asked me to go to Bombay to learn from him, but I couldn't ever bring myself to part from her. He was not only a wonderful teacher, but an erudite scholar as well. He once even taught Ammi the Bahaduri Todi, which very few people sing today.

His brother Yayyabhai Jasdanwala was a poet. Ammi has even sung some of his poetry. Ammi was instrumental in getting Madhu Rani married to their youngest brother. Madhu Rani had a beautiful voice. Madhu Rani is the *ustad* of the well known popular singer Penaz Masani.

Several well-known contemporary artists also used to drop in to meet her during her travels. Artists like Ulhas Kashalkar, would make it a point to greet her. She was very popular with both the purists as well as people who sang light classical music. In fact I think she was the first light classical singer to take *thumri* and *ghazal gayaki* to the concert level. Until she came on the scene, this style was restricted to the *kothas* and private *baithak* level. Even the other well-known performers from Benaras and other parts of UP only managed to make a name for themselves locally. But Ammi's success ensured that all future generations of musicians of this genre got a level playing field. In fact in those days classical singers would never include a *thumri* in their performance, but now it has become a practice to round off a performance with a song of the season.



Behzaad Lucknawi, whose famous *ghazal*, "*Deewana banana hai toh, deewana bana de…*" launched her on her road to stardom, was Ammi's court poet. He wrote most of his couplets with Ammi in mind and she on her part would sing anything written by him. He may not have been a highly stylized poet, in fact most critics would classify him as having written only very banal stuff, but his works were catchy. Most of it was easy to grasp and appealed to the masses. His other works that Ammi immortalized were "*Ae jazba-e-dil….*" and "*Un ankhon ka aalam gulaabi gulaabi…*" Behzad and Ammi complemented each other's talents beautifully. In fact, before Ammi married Abbassi Saheb, she only indulged in his poetry.

It was Abbu who later introduced her to more refined Urdu poets. He gave her the understanding of these finer things. It must be acknowledged that this is Abbu's main contribution to her professional career. Abbu's knowledge of Urdu poetry was encyclopedic. A word or turn of phrase would unravel beautifully in his treatment and take on a hundred shades of depth and meaning. Even his diction was superb. It must be acknowledged here that he added a class to her act.

Besides giving Ammi a name and a status in society whereby she could sit in the company of begums with ease, he also uplifted the quality of her performances by

subtly altering the poetry she sang! Otherwise would people like General Habibullah and Begum Pataudi and others have given her the time of the day had she just been an ordinary *bai* or singer? ICS officers and people from the local administration were amongst her close friends. Governors and Chief Justices would regularly dine at their table.

In those days it was also a matter of honour among new poets to get the stamp of Ammi's approval for their work. It became a fashion for poets to get their verses sung by Ammi, in a bid to gain popularity. Poets like Shamim, Shakeel, and others would vie with each other to get their verses sung by her, that would ensure a sure shot hit on their hands.

I remember the famous *ghazal*, "*Ae mohabbat tere anjaam pe rona aaya…*" started off as a little chit that the poet Shakeel stuffed into Ammi's hand, as he was seeing us off at Bombay Central station. I remember we were travelling back to Lucknow in one of those spacious old-style compartments. Overnight, Ammi puffed away at her cigarettes, while I slept soundly, blissfully unaware of the melodic history in the making. The next morning she pulled out her little travel harmonium and began setting the opening chords for the song that went on to become her all-time hit. By the time we reached Bhopal, she had already set it to tune, and within the next week she had even sung it on Lucknow Radio. It became a sensational hit.

One of her acquaintances at the radio station, Niazi, a programme producer as well as a composer, claimed that the tune was his. She challenged him to produce another one, even remotely similar to it! Soon thereafter, H.M.V. released it on their label and the *ghazal* itself became her identity. In fact these three *ghazals*, "*Diwana banana hai…*", "*Ae mohabbat…*" and "*Mere hum nafaz…*" are like the trinity of her fame. Even today when I am performing, whether the song features in my repertoire

or not, people always insist I sing a few lines from it, just for the sake of nostalgia. The memory of this melody will never fade.

I would go to the extent of saying that Shakeel's popularity hinged on the fact that Ammi chose to sing so many of his *ghazals*. There was a time when she only sang his compositions.

I have visited Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's house in Bombay with Ammi. He would always greet her fondly, "Akhtar, how are you? What brings you here? *Arre bhai*, is someone getting us some tea!" We would sit with him for hours and Ammi would regale him with her interminable stories. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Saheb has also been accused of singing more with his heart than his head, and I think this is a quality they both shared and this brought them close together.

I remember hearing Pandit Jasraj admit in one of his recent interviews that as a young boy growing up in Hyderabad, he had been highly impressed by Begum Akhtar's recordings. He used to idolize Ammi, often missing school in order to listen to her programmes. It was one of the factors that motivated him to take up music. In fact, Shobha Gurtu has also often acknowledged that Ammi was her inspiration.

There is this popular playback singer in Bombay who often came to meet Ammi at her hotel. I remember, once tea was being served and this lady stretched out her hand and helped herself to the cup that had been intended for Ammi. It was obvious she was insecure that something may have been added to her cup, casting aspersions at Ammi's hospitality. This incident really upset Ammi. She would always tell me that first and foremost one should learn to trust, and for the rest, leave it to God! "If God wants you to prosper, you will."

In the Bombay film world, Ammi was also very close to Khayyam. She was very fond of both him and his wife, Jagjit. Her last recording, "*Ulti ho gayi sab tadbeeren…*"

was composed by Khayyam. In fact that recording was incomplete at the time of her death. I remember when Ammi had come back from Bombay after the recording, she had typically complained, "*Kambakhton ne mujhse sab marnewali ghazalein gawaaein hain!*" (Those damn people made me record such morbid songs.) The songs were ultimately released posthumously, as they were, incomplete.

Ustad Amir Khan and Ammi had a mutual admiration for each other. He would always come to visit her at the Sea Green South Hotel on Marine Drive as soon as she arrived in Bombay. Once I remember she said to him, "Khan Saheb you have to sing a *thumri* for me!"

His reaction was immediate, "Me? Sing *thumri*? There is no way I am going to do that! Are you joking?"

"I beg of you. For my sake, Khan Saheb, please! Otherwise I'll have to die with this unfulfilled desire to hear you sing." After that he had no option but to comply. She was extremely persuasive. She could make anyone do anything!

Amir Khan and Ammi shared a special relationship. Khan Saheb had been married to Vilayat Khan's sister, and he had a daughter from that marriage. Since his divorce he had been unable to see her. Vilayat Khan's mother, Inayat Khan's wife, was a very stern woman and she had ensured that Amir Khan never saw his daughter. He would often tell Ammi about this pain of separation. She couldn't bear this. So she took it upon herself to quietly call the girl over to her hotel once and let Amir Khan Saheb meet her. She couldn't bear to see anyone suffer. She would never let him go without a meal. I remember she would call up the room service at the hotel and ask them to serve everything that was on the menu. She had such a large heart. Though she hardly ate anything herself, she would feed anyone who came to meet her.

The same way she accosted the guard at a remote railway station in Maharashtra. She had finished her stock of cigarettes. At first she asked me to go take a look if there was anything available outside. When I said that there was nothing available on the platform, that one would have to go outside the station to check, she brushed me aside irritatedly, "*Arre*! You let it be, you won't be able to manage this. Let me take charge."

She walked out onto the platform. Those days the bogies would open directly on to the platform. She signalled desperately to the guard on duty. Seeing her petite form, the guard must have assumed she was a lady in distress and he rushed to her side. Then she humbly told him, "*Arre bhaiyya*, my cigarettes are over! Can you please go across the road and get me a pack."

He was taken aback at first. The situation was far from what he must have imagined in his wildest dreams. He gruffly refused to do her bidding, "You don't get any cigarettes here!"

She immediately grabbed his hand, took charge of his lantern and flag and threatened she wouldn't return it until he got her a pack of Capstan! She thrust a hundred Rupee note into his palms and blessed his wife and children all in one breath and pleaded with him to run across the road and do as she said. What could the poor man do? He had to get her the cigarettes!

There used to be a good friend of Ammi's, Mehmood Baba, in Bombay. She had often performed at his residence during her sojourn in Bombay.

I remember we met a young woman, Vasundhara Pandit, at his place, who used to sometimes come and train under Ammi whenever she was in Bombay or Poona. She also travelled to Lucknow a couple of times to learn more intensively, and she was blessed with the most haunting voice. But unfortunately she died young.

There was this very interesting gentleman who went by the name of Mr. Trivedi, who was a veritable storehouse of poetic verse. There was no *ghazal, bandish, shayr, nazm, dhun, tukda* or *thumri* that Trivediji didn't know. One just had to hum a *mukhda* and Trivediji could easily tell you the rest of the stanzas, including who had recorded it last, when and where, etc. He was a walking encyclopaedia. Whenever Ammi was

in Bombay, he would be present at all her performances. She would often turn to him if she ever forgot a line. She would say, "What was the following *shayr*, Trivediji?" and he would be spot on with the relevant verse.

Many times he would take the liberty to prompt her to perform new and interesting verses she may never have performed before. And she would set them to tune there and then and leave a memorable impact on the audience, who were aware of what was afoot. Like the time we were sitting at Babubhai's house at the end of an evening's concert. There was Trivediji, Babubhai, his wife and a couple of close friends. Ammi was singing, "*Uzre sitam se dil na dukhao, paas-e-mohabbat rehne do*". This particular *ghazal* seemed to go on endlessly, with Trivediji's never ending prompting and Ammi adding her own twists and turns. Every shade, every nuance of feeling was laid out that night. It was miraculous!

Babubhai was a Kathiawari businessman. He owned a number of oil mills in Junagadh. He was a great appreciator of music. He would be on a number of music panels and trusts. She saw a compact spool recorder for the first time at his house. In fact Ammi was so impressed with it that she declared she was taking it at the end of a concert. Babubhai didn't think twice before he packed it for her!

Kaifi Azmi and Shaukat were great friends of Ammi's and I still remember that when I met him after her death he had said to me in sorrow, "(Her loss is so intense that) We both still don't realize what we have lost!"

Just weeks before Ammi died, All India Radio had organized a one-of-a-kind mehfil, which had a direct broadcast. Kaifi Azmi wrote fresh verse and Ammi would simultaneously render them into song. It was one of the most stunning live performances ever. He would read out a couplet and she would take it on from there. I think they tried to repeat the effect for a televised recording, but it didn't have the potency of that afternoon session on the radio.

There was an interesting incident concerning the well-known poet Amir Qadalbaksh, who died recently. Ammi was a big fan of his poetry. In fact they were very good friends as well. It was well known that she had played cupid in his romance with Saira Apa, the sister of the dhrupad maestros, Dagar Bandhu. Once while she was ensconced in Delhi, holding her regular *durbar* among poets and such like, she liked a *mukhda* of a *ghazal* that Amir Qadalbaksh was in the process of writing. She had to have the entire poem then and there. She immediately locked him up in her bathroom, with a crate of chilled beer, with the express threat that he wouldn't be let out until he had completed the verses.

He manfully protested, "I am a poet, not a tube of toothpaste."

"Well that is for you to prove, and me to approve!"

And she actually left him in there for hours.

He told me this story himself. In fact he laughed whole-heartedly for a long time when he remembered these and other instances of Ammi's legendary tantrums.

His friends had told me that he had become a recluse of late. A friend of his, Mr. Gill, used to try and drag him out of his depressive condition. It was Mr. Gill who called me up and told me how unwell he was. I called up Amir *bhai* immediately after that. His first reaction was to put the phone down, claiming he didn't talk to anyone these days.

Then I called and said, "Amir Bhai, it is me, Shanti!"

He said, "Oh!"

And then we talked for over an hour. And he only talked of Ammi in all that while. His earlier irritation was totally forgotten. And before putting the phone down he said, "You must keep in touch!" Sadly, he is no more.

Jaddan Bai, Nargis' mother, was a friend of Ammi's mother, Mushtri Begum. As a child Ammi often accompanied her on stage. In fact whenever we went to Bombay, Nargis would always come to meet Ammi. She would always respectfully refer to Ammi as Apa, or elder sister. Lata Mangeshkar would also come over to meet her.

Mehboob and his wife Sardar Akhtar were lifelong friends of Ammi's, so was Sohrab Modi. Actors like Chandramohan were well known to her.

Among the dancers she shared a close rapport with Sitara Devi, Achhan Maharaja, Lachhu and Shambhu Maharaj. Sitara Devi and she had acted in the movies together. As I mentioned earlier, they had some wonderful memories of those days. Lachhu Maharaj used to come over to visit her often at Havelock Road. He was Birju Maharaj's uncle and a good friend of Chhuttan Bhaiyya. They all lived in the same Ameenabad area. Whenever he dropped in, she would beg him to show her some *haav-bhaav*. He would request her to sing a *thumri*. Ammi often sang, "*Tore naina jaadu bhare…*", and then Lacchu Maharaj would go on to enact each nuance of emotion expressed through the text with his eyes. It used to be a pleasure and a privilege to be an audience to such show of talent. Ammi was a great fan of his. Although he had grown quite fat, and didn't perform too much on stage, he had a subtle touch and with the minimal movements he could depict a lover's gaze, or a woman's lustful eyes, doe-like, at once flitting like a gazelle, now fawning, now sharp, he could bring these and other emotions alive within a split second.

Among the instumentalists, the Veena player Mohammad Khan Saheb, the well-known *beenkar* and Vilayat Khan's brother-in-law was a friend of hers. Bismillah Khan was a huge fan of Ammi's. Ammi would also meet Vilayat Khan Saheb regularly at Arvind Bhai Parekh's residence. She used to be very free with him, "*Arre Vilayat, yeh cheez suno*." (Hey, Vilayat! Listen to this piece.) She would make him informally vet some of her new compositions.

Arvindbhai is a businessman friend of Ammi's from Gujarat, also a noted sitarist, having trained intensely under Vilayat Khan Saheb. Once while they were travelling together, Ammi had said to Arvind Bhai, "I have always wanted to learn the sitar

since I was a little girl." She also went on to mention the fact that she admired Vilayat Khan's style of stressing on the *gayaki ang*. She then requested him to give her initial training in sitar. Arvindbhai then formally took permission from his guru and started teaching Ammi, whenever she was in Bombay. Since then she started treating him as her guru. In fact she had promised him that she would practise so hard that when she got back from Ahmedabad, which she unfortunately never did, she would publicly perform on the sitar and make him proud of her.

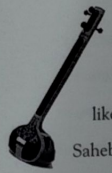
Arvindbhai on his part was among the few people who truly cared for her, not because she was a well-known artist, but because he and his wife Kishoriben were genuinely fond of her. He used to invite Ammi regularly at his residence and she would always comply. Even after Ammi's death both he and Kishoriben, and their daughter Poorvi are like a part of my family in Bombay. Kishoriben and Poorvi were students of Niaz and Fayyaiz Ahmed Khan Sahebs of the Kirana Gharana.

Ammi respected Niaz and Fayyaiz a lot as they were from her ustad's gharana. She would always present them with a *nazrana* whenever she met them, as was the practice in those days. Later she also initiated Sheila Dhar as their disciple. She wanted me to learn from them too, but I couldn't bear to part from Ammi, as I had mentioned earlier. But I kept up the practice of presenting them with a *nazrana* on Ammi's behalf, whenever we met. And they on their part would freely give me their *gharana bandishes* to sing. Unfortunately they are no more.

She was completely at home with most of the artists of her time and they in turn always respected her, either as an elder sister, or as a senior artist. She had such an aura that no one even bothered about her past.

Gyan Babu and Nikhil Bannerjee in Calcutta were some of the other names that come to mind. Gyan Prakash Babu was a highly creative musician of his era. He had composed several raagas and even brought the humble harmonium up to the level when it started being accepted as an instrument to accompany a classical performance. He was probably one of the first artists to use a harmonium for a solo performance on the radio in those days. There was a Mr. Mazumdar who was a great fan of Ammi's in Calcutta. He would never miss her shows in Calcutta. She was also close to the business families like the Goenkas and Singhanias.

Ammi always said that there were two places in India where if an artist is able to leave a mark, then success was certain for them. One of those places was Calcutta. She felt the audience here truly understood music.



The other place was Amritsar. According to her, people in Amritsar were honest connoisseurs of music. She said the people here accepted music with their hearts. She had an old friend Nayyar Saheb in Amritsar who was like her brother. Once Ammi entered Punjab, she had virtually entered Nayyar Saheb's domain and he would take care of her every need for comfort. Nayyar Saheb had a surgical store in the Haal Bazaar area of Amritsar. Whenever she was in Amritsar, he would be at her side. Whether it was two or three in the morning, it would make no difference to Nayyar Saheb. He would wait until her programme was over, escort her back to her hotel room and only then retire for the day, only to be back the next morning to be her chaperone for the rest of the tour.

I recall once when Ammi had gone for a concert, it was late evening in the hotel room. A few members of the audience who had a little too much to drink swaggered into Ammi's room and demanded that she sing for them. Thanks to Nayyar Saheb, he kept them in discussion for quite a while, and then they left, leaving Ammi to sleep.

Nayyar Saheb was a quiet man of few words. He came from an extremely good family and even though he may be no more today, if I visit Amritsar, I know that his children will go out of their way to make my stay more pleasant and comfortable, that my wish would be their command. That was the kind of love and affection he had inculcated in them!

Ammi had the highest respect for M.S. Subbulakshmi. They were slated to meet at an award function the same year that she died.

Besides these people Ammi also had a number of friends in the high societies of Delhi, Calcutta, Amritsar, Bombay and Patna. These were people she met as equals, despite her own humble origins. Her friends like Begum Bhopal, Begum Pataudi, whom we lovingly called Biya, remained her close confidantes to the very end. She even counted the Nawabs of Hyderabad, Nawab Zahir Yaar Jang, a close relative of the Nizam, and His Highness Mauzum Jah among her personal friends.

But she was also such a moody person. I remember, once in Bombay—this was years later, when she was no longer in the employ of any royal family—she had been invited to a dinner hosted by Shri Karan Singh. Now nobody would stand up a person of his stature. But Ammi was in no mood to go for an official dinner albeit hosted by a King. She was enjoying herself with a bunch of struggling artists and neo-poets, Babubhai and his wife at Juhu beach on a full moon night, listening to their work-in-progress, playfully setting new *ghazals* to tune. She quickly sent word through official channels that she had a stomach ache and therefore wouldn't be able to attend the dinner and continued enjoying herself with her cronies! She was a great one for making up excuses.

Other times she would land up at midnight for dinner invitations with friends. Saiyyada Apa once told me that she had invited Ammi and Abbu for dinner. She had moved to AIR Delhi. She and her husband waited until eleven. Then they finally gave up on Ammi and Abbu, had their dinner and turned in for the night. At midnight Saiyyada Apa said she heard someone call out to her, "*Saddo…Saddo*", in a low and scary voice. She turned towards the window at her bedside and saw Ammi trying to peer in through the grills. She told Ammi to go away irritatedly. Ammi burst into a million sparkling giggles. This angered Saiyyada Apa further, so she told her, "We have had our dinner, there is nothing left for you to eat, please go away!" Ammi took her completely by surprise, "*Saddo*, I have brought a little mouse for you as a present. If you don't let me in, I'll have to let him in through the window!" Saiyyada Apa said she had no option but to let her in. Ammi was like that.

I remember a time when some Pakistani Customs officials had stopped her after crossing the Wagah border, after one of her concerts in Pakistan. When they demanded a substantial duty for all her imported crockery and perfumes, she refused to pay. She asked them to do what they will, but that she wouldn't pay a penny. They settled for a *ghazal* instead, rendered especially for them!

There is another incident from those days that I cannot leave out. I had gone to receive her at the airport, on her return from one of her trips to Afghanistan. She came striding out like her Royal Highness, while Munne Khan, who had accompanied her, brought up the rear. He had a dozen or so *jhadoos* in his arms. They were flourishing proudly in the air like peacock feathers, making him look all the more ridiculous. I was trying my best not to splutter. He irritatedly asked Ammi,

"*Bibi*, how long am I supposed to carry these?"

"Just hang onto them until I tell you what to do!" She gave him a sharp look.

When I asked her about them she said, "*Bitiya* these are wonderful *jhadoos*. You don't get such good *jhadoos* here!"

"Ammi! *jhadoos*? What will you do with so many of them?"

"Aye!" She said, " I'll give one to Khatoon *bitiya*, you take one, Saiyyada would like one…there are so many people I want to give these to!"

Everyone who received one would have to say that they were wonderful because she would aggressively say, "Aren't they nice?"

One would invariably have to say, "Yes Ammi, they are special."

And her eyes would glint when she had the final word, "Didn't I tell you!"

Ammi was extremely close to Charatramji and his family here in Delhi. She used to make it a point to always perform on his birthday, on the 31 December. Another family she was close to in Delhi was that of Poorie Saheb, Aroon Purie's father, who used to be a film distributor in those days. She would perform regularly at their house. Even now when I meet some of these people, there is a tremendous sense of nostalgia.

Sheila Bhatia and her husband Wali were also good friends of Ammi. They were heavily into theatre and Ammi would often collaborate with them by providing the music for their stage productions. She quite enjoyed working with different media, and she was quite fond of theatre having earned a name for herself from there.

All these people would treat her like royalty. She commanded that kind of respect. She would walk like a queen, talk like a queen. If people gave her gifts, she too would shower them with gifts in return. She would also make it a point to carry a substantial gift like a piece of jewellery for the lady of the house when she would perform at someone's private *baithak*, equal if not more than the monetary compensation they would give her for the programme. She was very particular about this. And as a result of this she was never treated like some ordinary baiji or professional singer in all the years that I travelled with her. Once the famous actress Sushma Seth came up to me during a concert in someone's house in Delhi and said to me that she and her husband had laid a bet. Her husband claimed that I was Ammi's daughter, she was sure that I was not. Later that evening I remember telling Ammi about this curious incident. She just smiled at me and said that, "So what if I haven't actually given birth to you, you are still like my very own."

People would welcome her into their hearts and homes like one of their own! She would reciprocate their affection in equal measure. I remember when Luthraji, a Station Director at AIR, was seriously ill, and the doctors had more or less lost hope, she sat by his side, reading from the Koran all night until he miraculously recovered the next day.

She also had the habit of never asking for favours. No one could point a finger at her for her lack of education. She was always subtle, and would never haggle over her fees, or discuss payments crudely. In fact I have seen Jawaharlal Nehru stand up in the audience when she walked onto the stage before a concert at Red Fort, Delhi.

On a number of occasions she wouldn't even charge her close friends for private *baithaks*. For instance, if there was a wedding or *mundan* ceremony or something in the family, she would say, "*Arre*, it is as if my own daughter is getting married, I will sing for the sheer joy of it!" In that case she would make it a point to carry an expensive gift from her side, which would invariably be something quite unique, that people would be proud to receive and show off to their friends, "Begum Akhtar has given this!"

I remember there was this lady Aziza Imam in Patna, who later even became an MLA. Ammi and she would meet and exchange old gossip with such relish. News of former admirers would have them giggling like schoolgirls. Aziza was quite a romantic, in the same mould as Ammi.

Ammi also had a number of friends and admirers in Lahore, but these people I was not very familiar with.

As I have said earlier, the most special corner in her heart was reserved for artists. She loved to be in their company, as much to exchange notes as also to drink and be merry on occasions. There was a special wavelength she shared with them that she didn't share with her family for instance. They couldn't understand a number of things about her. For them she was just a bread earner and nothing more. No wonder she would run away from home to be with these people with whom she shared her soul.

Like the times we would gather at Benazir Khala's old house in Naqkhas, along with Ahmed Jaan Thirakawa, Chhuttan Bhaiyya, Benazir herself, her sister Zohar, Lalloo Babu and me. We would all sit around on *takhts* and Khan Saheb would be playing unimaginable *gats* on the *tabla* and singing. I feel so nostalgic for those days....

اُلٹی ہو گئیں سب تدبیریں ۔ ۔ ۔ ۔ ۔

Ulti ho gayin sab tadbeeren...

All my efforts have boomeranged (on me)...

Union with God

A few days before Ammi left for Ahmedabad, we sang together at a Sangeet Sammelan here in New Delhi. She created a big fuss just before the concert began, claiming that she wanted two harmoniums instead of one to accompany her. Mr. Barve, who was the programme executive in-charge of the show, made it clear that this would not be possible. She fumed, "Call the DG Saheb right now, if I don't have two harmoniums to accompany me, I am not performing today. You can do what you like!"

Mr. Barua, an Assamese gentleman was the DG at that time. He immediately arrived on the scene to calm her down and Mr. Satish Bhatia, the well-known composer on All India Radio stepped in and saved the day. One harmonium was immediately organized for her personal use and if my memory serves me, Satish recorded her. I clearly remember, she was not looking well at all that day. In fact right after the programme she slipped and fainted at the hotel bathroom. I grew worried about her. I begged her to reconsider the Ahmedabad assignment. But she was adamant about keeping her appointments. If she insisted on going, I insisted that she should at least let me accompany her. But she looked completely resigned as she said

to me, "*Bitiya*, this journey that I am about to embark on, I will have to go it alone. Nobody can accompany me where I am going!" I cried and begged her not to speak to me so cruelly. But she just said, "Life is a journey, *bitiya*, and you know that one is either on this side or the other. The bells are tolling for me, finally."

It was as if she had a premonition of sorts. She had recently also recorded an album for Khayyam delving into the deep mysteries of death by a number of great masters. On several occasions earlier she had also made it clear that she wanted to die in one clean sweep. She didn't want to linger on, like Rasoolan Bai for instance, because she was sure her family would abandon her.

I remember seeing her off at the airport. It must have been the 24th or 25th of October 1974. She was wearing a green cotton sari. She had been unable to get a seat for Ahmedabad, so she flew to Bombay instead.

Ammi was very particular about never staying in friends' houses. As I had mentioned earlier, she had these permanent rooms booked at this fabulous sea-facing Sea Green South Hotel on Marine Drive. But on that occasion she called up Arvindbhai and his wife Kishoriben to ask if she could stay with them instead. They gladly welcomed her to their home.

Kishoriben told me later that she was in a state all through the time she stayed with them. She refused to let them out of her sight. She wanted them to be by her side all the time. And she talked. She talked like she had never talked before. She began telling them her life story, right from day one, and unspooled every episode from its rich tapestry. She seemed to be in a hallucinatory state, as she would sound incoherent at times. She also apparently said that in her life every person she had met had only used and abused her. No one had ever loved her in return for all that she had done for them, except for one person from among her students and whom she

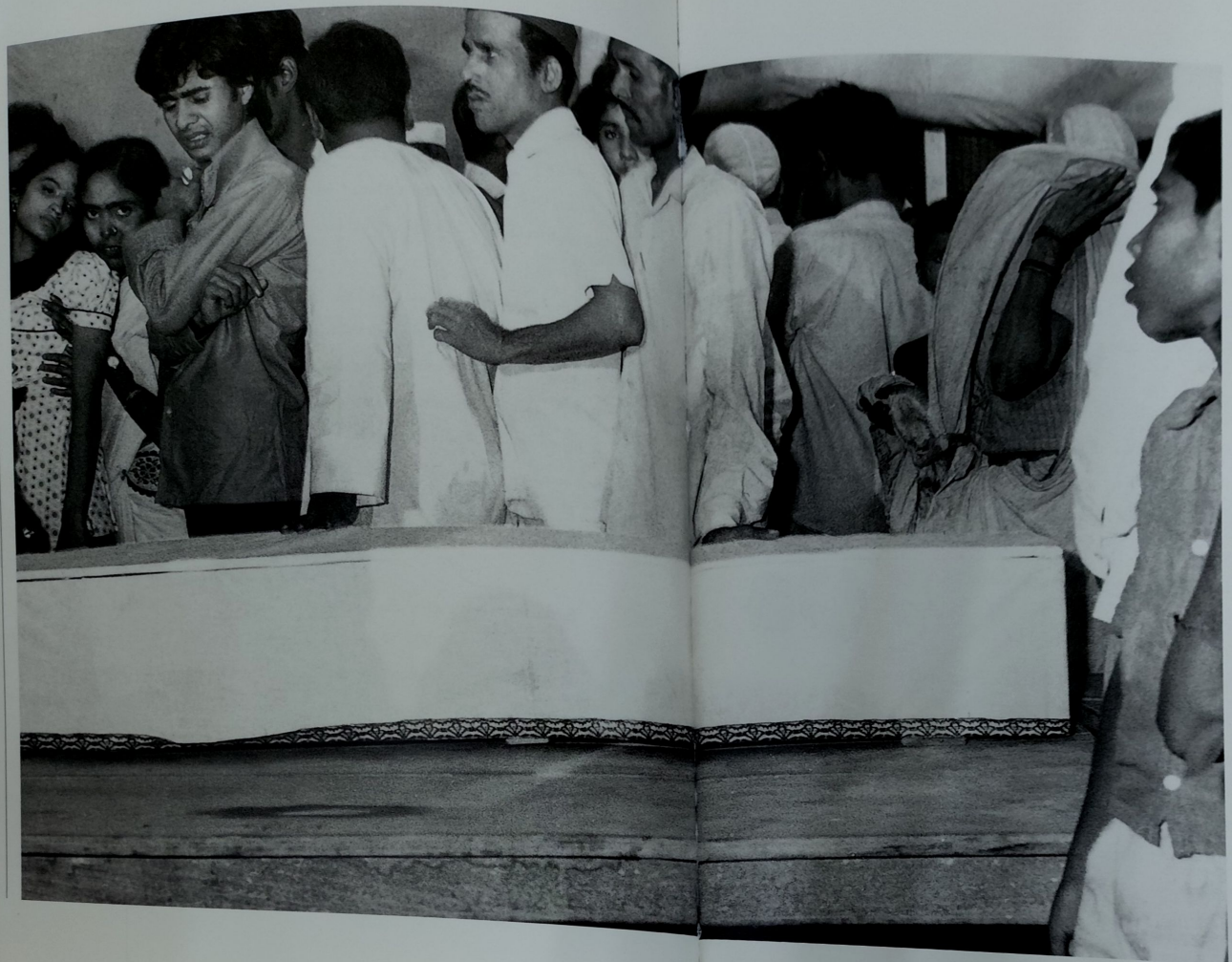
took for granted, and then she took my name. They told me later that she blessed me then, and prayed that Allah would give me every conceivable joy.

Arvindbhai told me with tears in his eyes that they were very worried for her. They called in a doctor to take a look at her. The doctor was not satisfied with her condition. So they both begged her to cancel the Ahmedabad trip. When she didn't relent, they told Mohammad Ahmed, who was to accompany her on the *tabla* as usual, to take special care of her and keep them informed in case her condition worsened.

By the time she reached Ahmedabad for her programme, she was extremely unwell. Yet she sang until three in the morning. It was a concert organized by Neelam Gamadia. People there told me later that she was in such top form that when Tiger Pataudi made an entry, she stood up to welcome him, as one from her background would normally welcome royalty. Her manners were impeccable! The last item she performed was the beautiful *Chaiti*, "*Sowat nindiya jagaye, o Rama…*" By this time she was finding it too laborious to continue, so they finally wrapped up the programme.

By the time they reached the hotel her condition had worsened. This was on the night of the 27 October 1974. She was rushed to a hospital, where I am convinced she was not given adequate care. Her heart was enlarged and she was having a tremendous amount of difficulty breathing. She had also been forbidden from smoking.

By now Mohammad Ahmed grew panicky. He called up Arvindbhai the next morning to ask him what to do. He also subsequently called Sheila Dhar in Delhi. Sheila was P.N. Dhar's wife. Dhar was the Principal Secretary to the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Besides, Sheilaji was also very close to Ammi at that time. Sheilaji called me up immediately and we were constantly monitoring her condition



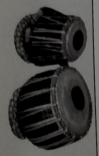
over the phone. Sheilaji even felt that in case her condition improved they would fly her down to Delhi for treatment. It was she who suggested that I should inform Abbassi Saheb in Lucknow.

I immediately called up Abbu and asked him if I should go to Ahmedabad to be with Ammi. He told me to wait. He said that he would send Mukhtar, Shammo's husband, and Shama to Delhi and requested me to pick them up at the station and put them on a train to Ahmedabad. Everything happened in such a hurry and I was so dazed that I didn't even remember to ask them which train they

were taking from Lucknow. It was the morning of the 29 October when they arrived. Although it was my birthday on that day, I didn't even remember it then. I was so worried about Ammi.

I had an old servant with me in those days, Mahilal. The two of us went to the station and stood at different exits, to try and spot them. This man, Mahilal, didn't even know who he was to look out for at the station, as he had never met Shama and Mukhtar. He stood at one corner of the Ajmeri Gate exit, accosting anyone getting off from any train, "Are you Mukhtar Saheb from Lucknow!" Anyway his trick worked and we finally met them and brought them home. They stayed with me that day.

Arrangements were made for them to take the train to Ahmedabad that same evening. They would arrive there by the next morning, i.e. 30 October 1974. I was keen to go with them. But Shama begged me to stay back. Abbassi Saheb was arriving by flight that evening. She asked me to wait for him and accompany him to Ahmedabad, as he was too frail to take on the stress of the journey on his own. Shama was going ahead so that she could assist Ammi at the hospital.



Jagan and I received Abbu at the airport on 30 October evening and brought him home. We made him feel as comfortable as we could.

He had just had a light meal and lay down, when I received a phone call from Satish Bhatia, from All India Radio, informing me that Ammi was no more. He told me that their Ahmedabad station had just made the announcement. Mohammad Ahmed had called the radio station from the hospital, apparently. My legs felt paralysed when I heard the news; I could neither sit nor stand anymore. Jagan took the phone from my hands and got the rest of the news from him. He made me sit down. And he started making a few inquiries to get a clear confirmation.

Just then Mohammad Ahmed, her faithful *tabalchi* from Mumbai, called us from Ahmedabad. His call confirmed our worst fears. My husband took his call on my behalf. We asked him what had to be done. He just said that they were making arrangements for bringing her to Delhi by the early morning flight and that we should be at the airport. I was in a state of shock. I couldn't even bring myself to cry.

Apparently she had been suffering intensely for the last two days. By the time Shama and Mukhtar arrived the situation was already hopeless. Babubhai, her close friend from Bombay, had managed to meet her before she died. Ten minutes before she passed away she had asked for all the windows to be opened, so that she could breathe. Mukhtar advised her to read the *Kalma*. She must have barely uttered "*Ya Ilahi*…", then she suddenly had tears in her eyes when she said, "*Bechare Mian*", in an obvious reference to Abbu. After that her spirit left her body. It was the night of 30 October 1974.

Mohammad Ahmed later told me that he had initially called up the radio station to ask them for assistance. But unfortunately nobody from the radio station in Ahmedabad even bothered to talk to him once they had heard that she had passed away. Neither the Station Director nor any of the duty officers turned up to help. The hospital coldly informed them to remove the body once it had been embalmed.

Shama said they were then advised by some far off relatives who were in Ahmedabad to take her body to a girls' orphanage nearby. The girls there would perform the *ghusal*, or ritual bathing of the body. Apparently they bathed the body, ceremonially reading chapters from the Koran, and with each *ayat*, they would anoint the body with greatest of dignity and care. It was all very elaborate and beautiful, yet Shama said she couldn't help feeling very strange and alone there.

Jagan took the decision not to inform Abbassi Saheb at night. He felt that since he was a high-blood-pressure patient, it would be too much of a shock for him. My husband then called up S. K. Bannerjee, an MP, to advise us on what to do.

Mr. Bannerjee had the greatest of respect for Ammi. He tried to trace a number of ministers and bureaucrats. Every minister worth his salt was in Srinagar with the Prime Minister at that time. This included Sheilaji and her husband too. We felt almost orphaned. Who could we possibly turn to now? Mr. Bannerjee talked to people who used to be big fans of Ammi's. And they just passed the buck, saying he should call so and so or the other. Eventually he was so disgusted with their attitude that he gave up. Later when the Parliament was in session, he even raised this issue on the floor of the house. And the government felt chastised enough to bestow upon Ammi a Padma Vibhushan, albeit posthumously!

My husband then spoke to P.C. Lall, who was the chief of Airports Authority of India in those days, around midnight. He was a friend of my husband. He said he would have a VIP lounge opened to receive her body the next day, but as far as chartering a flight was concerned, he required a minister's prior permission.

Mohammad Ahmed called up around one in the morning informing us that Arvindbhai had arrived in Ahmedabad and that he had arranged for Shama and Mukhtar to travel with Ammi's body on an early morning flight to Delhi, also that we should be at the airport by nine.

Jagan then rang up Lucknow and informed the family.

At about 4.30 in the morning I finally made a hot cup of tea and took it to Abbu. He woke up and asked me the time. When I told him he said calmly, "There is still time to read the *namaz*." I didn't utter a word. I simply shook my head and left him to wash up and say his prayers. After a while I brought him another cup of tea.

"You know I never take another cup of tea, *bitiya*." Then he suddenly looked up and saw the look on my face and said, "What happened?" He had understood. I was crying. My face was white. "She has finally killed herself, hasn't she? I had told her not to go for this programme. But she never listened to me. Why would she?" He had realized that she was no more.

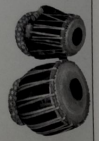
We went to the airport to wait for her body to arrive. A friend of mine Jamila Verghese took charge of my house, and made arrangements for Ammi's coffin to be placed in our large hall. She had the place beautifully decorated with flowers suitable for the occasion. Her husband, B.G. Verghese, the well-known journalist, offered to bring a hearse van to the airport.

A decision had been taken by common consent that we would bring Ammi to my house at Hauz Khas, to give people in Delhi a chance to pay their last respects, and then arrange to reach Lucknow in time for her remains to be interred before the day was over. Jagan had in fact suggested that we could take an entire air-conditioned bogie on the train to Lucknow, and all of us could accompany Ammi on her last journey home. Abbu was very keen that they reach Lucknow as early as possible. According to their family custom, the body must be buried within twenty-four hours of passing away. He even suggested that they could load her coffin onto a bus and leave for Lucknow from the airport itself. Jagan felt that this would have been too undignified for Ammi. Besides the bus journey itself was no joke; it was more than 400 kms to Lucknow!

We were even willing to charter an aircraft at our private cost, but Abbu would not hear of it. What would it have cost to charter a flight in those days? Some ten thousand rupees! Ammi was worth much more than that measly sum to us.

More than anything else these arguments and discussions just go to prove the utter callousness of the government of the time, which had reduced us to bickering over these little issues.

Her body arrived at 9 am. Again, although P.C. Lall had sent instructions beforehand, nobody at the airport would allow us to use any of the VIP lounges. They were all locked. And nobody seemed to have a key. It was so bizarre. They just placed her body on one of the luggage trolleys on the side of the tarmac, with supreme indifference and washed their hands off.



Bannerjee and my husband created a fuss, but no one could be bothered. I just sat down on the tarmac, next to her coffin.

Slowly people started trickling in. The papers had reported her death by then. I think people had also heard the radio announcement the previous night. Naina Devi was one of the first to arrive. Then some of Ammi's other students came.

"*Arre*! Why is her body lying on the tarmac?" Everybody would demand of us accusingly, as if we were not already doing our best to ensure a dignified passage for Ammi. What could we say to them, that we were trying our best; that our best wasn't good enough!

Ammi had always been proud of the fact that nothing could ever stall her progress. She would always say, *Mera kaam kabhi nahi rukega*! She would plan her programmes at the last minute. At the eleventh hour she would send me to the airlines office to book her tickets. It wasn't like it is these days. There were fewer flights then and invariably these would always be full. Most people had to resort to getting some VIP to pull out special quota seats for emergency travel. But with Ammi, the moment I would mention that the seats were for Begum Akhtar, the staff on duty would say, "*Begum Sahiba ke liye*?" (You need the seats for Begum Akhtar?) And they would manage to somehow put her on the flight!

It was the same for train reservations. She wouldn't even blink an eyelid, if her itinerary changed midway through a tour. I would be the one sweating with anxiety wondering how it would all be managed, but she would always sail through with supreme confidence and somehow everything would work out for her.

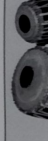
In fact, once we were returning to Delhi together, after a concert in Amritsar. It was late in the afternoon, in the month of *Ramzaan*. Ammi was fasting and as I had mentioned earlier, she used to get extremely agitated towards the hour of *iftaar*.

The cabin attendant was an extremely cultured Muslim gentleman. After making some polite conversation with Ammi, he enquired if Ammi was fasting. He then quietly advised her to move out of the compartment and had us shifted to a more private coupe, at his own initiative. Later when we were comfortably settled in our seats, he told us he had done this because he was convinced that the men in the compartment would start drinking and smoking once the train pulled out of the station. Since she was fasting, it wouldn't be appropriate for her to be in that ambience. We were very charmed by his concern. Anyway the train started and we got busy chatting. Soon it was the hour of *iftaar*. Within seconds we were served chilled *nimbu pani*, along with some nuts and dried dates, the traditional *iftaari*. After that sandwiches and hot *pakoras* arrived; then some delicious *masala* tea was served to us in special crockery. We were overwhelmed. Ammi called the attendant eventually and asked him how much she owed him. He absolutely refused to take any payment. First of all he said it was his privilege to have served her and secondly, it was an *iftaari*, he couldn't possibly charge her for it.

She also had this firm belief that if one asked something of Allah with a firm faith, you would never be disappointed. So years ago, when she was passing through Roorkee, she had visited the Kali-ar Sharief Mosque near there. Those were tough times and she and Amma were going through severe financial crisis. Her spirit was broken, and she literally ended up crying for help. Soon after that she was blessed with fame, to which she would characteristically say that her success was a blessing from the saints.

"*Mera kaam kabhi nahi rukega*"…the words rang through my head as we sat in the hot sun next to her coffin on the tarmac, wondering how we would transport her mortal remains to Lucknow that day.

Just then a pilot, who was passing by, inquired whose coffin it was lying unclaimed on the trolley. We were all huddled around, trying to console each other. One of us mentioned that it was Begum Akhtar's, and that we were trying to somehow arrange to get her to Lucknow today, so that her mortal remains could be



interred before this evening. He valiantly came forward and took the initiative to carry her back home.

"And why not?" he said proudly. He had flown regularly between Lucknow and Delhi on a number of occasions earlier. And he had had the honour of flying her innumerable times before. He remembered the time when he told her what a big fan he was of hers; of how she had even presented him with a beautifully embroidered Lucknawi *kurta*, as a memento. They had even shared cigarettes after a flight. It would indeed be an honour for him to take her back on this, her last journey. Tears filled our eyes when we thought of the simple love she brought to people. A love that made so many people admire her for life.

Now the only problem was that his flight that day was up to Kanpur and this meant that arrangements would still have to be made for her *janaza* to be transported to Lucknow from the Kanpur airport. But we were all so taken up with his offer that we willingly agreed. After that he made sure that all the paperwork required went through, to ensure Abbassi Saheb, Mukhtar and Shama could also accompany her on her last journey home. The rest of us would take the evening flight directly to Lucknow.

By the time word reached Havelock Road that they were coming, Abbu, Mukhtar and Shama were already halfway to Lucknow in a taxi, with Ammi's *janaza* loaded onto the carrier. Abbu was in such a hurry that day. But still I must say he waited for us to arrive and only then did they start the proceedings.

Sadly by the time we arrived they had already enshrouded her body in the special *ehram* she had brought back with her from one of her Haj journeys. An *ehram* is a special unstitched garment that women would use to perform Haj, and this one had been dipped in the holy waters of Mecca, *aab-e-zamzam*. She had also been smeared with the dust, or *khhaakh*, that she had borne back from Kaaba for the purpose. A tiny Koran had already been placed on her chest.

We solemnly watched as her body was ritually interred in its final resting place. Chhuttan Bhaiyya performed all the ceremonies. According to the tenets of Islam, the contract of marriage became nullified upon death and thus Abbu no longer had the right to touch her. He had become the outsider. The bond between me and Abbu continued even after Ammi's death as I kept visiting him on an almost monthly basis till he died four years later.

شامِ غم کچھ اُس نگاہِ ناز کی باتیں کرو
بیخودی بڑھتی چلی ہے راز کی باتیں کرو

Sham-e-gham kuch us nigah-e-naaz ki baatain karo
Bekhudi badhti chalti hai raaz ki baatain karo
Let us talk about those magical eyes this gloomy evening
Let us talk about the secrets (of love) even as my ecstasy continues to increase

EXTINCTION

I met Shammo almost a year after Ammi's death. At first we just hugged and cried in her memory, trying our best to console each other. After that she recounted this incident from Ammi's burial that has stayed and haunted me to this day.

As was the custom among them, three months after her death, her temporary grave was dug up so that a permanent structure could be put up at the site. Shammo said she was sitting by the side of the grave while the workmen assigned to this task were digging and trying to get the job done in a day.

When they finally hit the wooden planks, below which Ammi lay, Shammo couldn't contain herself anymore. She wanted to see Ammi just once more, before the concrete structure would cover her for evermore.

She waited for the workers to take a break during lunch. She then begged one of them to please uncover a plank so she could see Ammi's face just once!

He said it was against the tenets of his religion, and what's more it would be an insult to the departed soul. But Shammo was adamant. She begged him. She pleaded with him with tears in her eyes.

He finally had no option but to relent. With the greatest of care he prized open a plank and bade Shammo take a look, averting his own eyes all the time, to avoid being labelled a sinner.

According to Shammo, at first her perfume filled the air; the same smell that I particularly associated with her, a mixture of tobacco and her favourite scents. Ammi had always been extremely fond of perfumes. If someone were to present her with a new perfume, she would go gaga over it for days on end. The heightened smell of perfume intermingled with that of cigarettes; that is how I remember her. For years whether I would be sitting behind her during performances, clutching at her saree, whether I was pressing her feet at night at Havelock Road or dozing off close to her, whether I was her chaperone at some hotel room, her willing accomplice in strange new ports of call, it was this smell that filled up my senses. This is something inextricable from my memory of her.

Then Shammo said she gathered her nerves to look. She claims that when she actually looked down, and she took the name of Allah to swear that she was telling the truth, Ammi lay pristine, intact, complete, just the way she had been the day she had been interred. Not a tissue in her frame had deteriorated with the passing of the months. Even her hair remained untouched by death, in fact a lusty lock of her hair had come out despite the restraining headgear!

That is how I would like to imagine her even today. Pure, complete and untainted, even death could not devour her spirit.

اے محبت ترے انجام پہ رونا آیا۔۔۔۔

Ai muhabbat tere anjaam pe rona aya...
O love, I feel like crying at your predicament...

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GLOSSARY

Ang: literally means "limb" or "body"; a characteristic phrase of a raag; a style of singing or playing; an aspect
Baithak: drawing-room concert
Bandish: fixed vocal or instrumental composition bound by rhythmic cycle
Bandish-ki-thumri: vocal style, giving predominance to word content, rarely in vogue today.
Beenkar: one who plays the been (veena); also the name of a gharana that has descended from Tansen's family.
Bhav: emotion.
Bhavgeet: popular Marathi song, with erotic or devotional content.
Bol-bant-ki-thumri: thumri which is musically rendered while laying due emphasis on the words of the song text.
Dadra: taala with three plus three units; musical style sung in dadra.
Dhrupad: ancient style of composition in twelve beats and classed with dhamar; composition in which notes, words, and timebeats are fixed, with no tans or other embellishments permitted; type of composition with emphasis on rhythm, and alap preceeding a song.
Gayaki: manner or style or vocal rendition.

Gharana: literally, "family tradition", school or centre of musical culture established for instruction from master to pupil, at times by members of one family, perpetuated to succeeding generations; musical dialect.
Guru: preceptor; master; competent teacher; spiritual guide.
Kharja: sa of lower octave.
Khayal Gayaki: Khayal singing.
Khayal: literally means "fancy" or "idea" or "imagination"; style of singing; currently, the predominant vocal style of Hindustani tradition.
Kotha: a residential complex where female singers (who were courtesans) lived.
Kothi: a large residential complex with large number of rooms, a huge garden.
Mazhar: tomb.
Mehfil: concert or soiree.
Mukhda: opening passage or profile (of raag or taala).
Palta: vocal exercise of scale-notes in early years of training.
Punjab-ang thumri: thumri rendered in Punjabi style.
Purab-ang: style of singing thumri or playing musical instrument or percussion in vogue in eastern Uttar Pradesh.
Raag/Raga: melodic basis of Indian classical music; melodic seed-idea, capable of extempore growth through improvisation.
Riyaz: daily practice.
Shagird: pupil or disciple.
Taala: a cyclic arrangement of time units with defined sections.
Thumri: light classical form originating in eastern Uttar Pradesh.
Ustad: counterpart of Guru; Urdu term for mostly Muslims; also title, denoting respect for any notable, highly-learned man.

Shanti Hiranand was born in a business family in Lucknow. Her penchant for music goes back to her childhood. Soon it became an all consuming passion for her. Starting her early training at the Music College in Lucknow, she had to shift to Lahore in the early forties because of her father's business interests. Her first performance was on Radio Lahore in 1947. After partition her family shifted back to Lucknow and she started training under Ustad Aijaz Hussain Khan of Rampur. Alongside she continued performing on AIR. She met her Guru, Guide and Mentor in Begum Akhtar in 1957. Ammi trained her in the traditional forms of *thumri*, *dadra* and *ghazal* singing. Begum Akhtar's passing away in 1974 drove her to dedicate her entire efforts to excel in the art given to her by her Guru.